Plagiarism and the Crisis of Higher Education

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Abstract: Who are complaining about Romania that is far behind the developed democracies is wrong at least in one point. The practices and events of the last years proved that it has already aligned to the most advanced democracies as USA and Canada in aspect of the judicialization of politics, even though it has a genuine form. The fierce political battles of the last years, were characterized by unbelievable penal allegations ranging from the benign parliamentary political cross talk transformed in violations of the right to speech and of the presumption of innocence to the high treason and the coup d'état interpretations of some diplomatic discussions and civic protests. This generalized judicialization of politics has an unexpected collateral victim. Several major political leaders and heads of public, juridical or military institutions were accused of plagiarism in their doctoral thesis.

Keywords: *plagiarism; higher education; democracy; judicialization..*

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Who are complaining about Romania that is far behind the developed democracies is wrong at least in one point. The practices and events of the last years proved that it has already aligned to the most advanced democracies as USA and Canada in aspect of the judicialization of politics, even though it has a genuine form. The fierce political battles of the last years, were characterized by unbelievable penal allegations ranging from the benign parliamentary political cross talk transformed in violations of the right to speech and of the presumption of innocence to the high treason and the coup d'état interpretations of some diplomatic discussions and civic protests. This generalized judicialization of politics has an unexpected collateral victim. Several major political leaders and heads of public, juridical or military institutions were accused of plagiarism in their doctoral thesis. The problem of academic and research misconduct was unveil and become a public concern as a result of this effort for spoiling the image of political adversaries. A side-effect of these basically unethical battles exposed the problems related to ethics of research and academic integrity in Romanian universities. The Romanian academic system became unwillingly collateral victim, but for its own good. Who have thought that the transition from the academician Elena Ceaușescu to the meritocratic higher education system would be an easy and natural one has wrong. The people in authoritarian regime are confronted with the dare option of making, overt or tacit, regular compromises or face daring consequences. Their life is characterized by a generalized „circumstantial moral bad luck” and from here the prone to develop a twisted or perverted individualistic moral for surviving. The ethically elitist academic system has had to be rebuilt from the ground. But it didn't. With all due respect and understanding towards those who have the misfortune to develop professionally and humanly during the communist era, and to those who have succeeded because of their own merits and work *also*, at collective level, the social system could not produce quality and even less ethical preeminence. And how could anyone imagine that the quality and reforms of higher education would be promoted by very those who are part of the problem? It doesn't mean that those people are blamable, but this should be a requisite assent for the moral individual and collective self-healing, which wasn't overtly assumed by post-Decembrist Romanian intellectual elites.

Of course, other factors as economic problems as fee based education for self-financing of the universities, the economic, and not academic, competition of set up overnight private universities, slow and chaotic legislative reforms and lack of adequate human resources played a powerful role as well. The unprofessional re-professionalization of former

scholars and fast forward new university elites, made on a conveyor belt, perpetrated an obtuse, but shiny polished from outside higher education system. In this system the new fresh true academic spirit of objectivity and fully moral integrity penetrated only gradually.

But the public dishonorable issues presented in the beginning are only the tip of the iceberg. The numerous doctorate thesis proven plagiarized, the large number of “scientific” works written in penitentiary conditions for sentence period reduction and the negligence with which many students deal with the correct use of information from the Internet, all, of these highlights the lack of ethical culture across society and the need to increase the quality of research and didactic activity, not only by improving the infrastructure and learning conditions, but also by continuously professionalizing the teaching staff and creating a healthy academic environment. The experience of bachelor and master thesis check before its defense with a similarity percentage reaching sometimes up to 80 or 100 percent reveals the need for awareness-raising measures among students. The lack of a culture of excellence and quality of research affects the level of performance within the Romanian higher education system. The totalitarian social structures and ideology hinder the development of democratic values antibodies both in form of individual values and social institutions.

As long as the problem of research misconduct is mostly limited to the level of plagiarism and self-plagiarism, the real dimension of academic imposture remains concealed. The problem of originality varies among academic domain of research. Even the current legal definition of plagiarism is inadequate and confusing.¹ For example it is hard to believe that a speaker will fragment his lecture in order to mention explicitly all sources underlying his argumentation. Such thing will be as unproductive as detrimental for the discourse. Similar, it is absurd to pretend for a human person to trace the origin of all his ideas. In this precise interpretation Shakespeare would be nothing than a lousy plagiarist (McCarthy & Schlueter, 2018). The solely formal and legal aspects of ethical conduct in teaching and research are misleading and any quantitative standards will not improve the quality of higher education systems by themselves as any quantitative social indicators for quality and research loses its validity over time.

¹ plagiarism - exposure in a written work or oral communication, including in electronic form, of texts, phrases, ideas, demonstrations, data, hypotheses, theories, results or scientific methods extracted from written works, including electronic ones, of other authors, without mentioning this and without referring to the original sources. (Law no. 206-2004 on good scientific research, technological development and innovation conduct: article 4. al. (1), subpct. d).

The real problem of academic research, especially in humanities is two-folded. At intellectual level it is the lack of creativity, i.e. ability to have new ideas and perspectives that have value. The inability to produce an original understanding in the its own academic domain leads to deceiving research works which range from the most striking phenomenon of academic imposture, plagiarism, related with the grobian copy & paste and plain translations to more subtle forms of disguised plagiarism, mosaic plagiarism, pawn sacrifice, clause quilt, shake & paste or cut & slide techniques, structural plagiarism, partial reuse or self-plagiarism (Weber-Wulff, 2014). But plagiarism is only the most obvious form of research misconduct. But the problem of originality varies across various scientific domains. The more precise and rigorous is the scientific language of a field the more limited is the originality of expression. The problem of writing plagiarism is meaningful especially for the domains where the theoretical research forms the core of investigation. For the originality in other domains of research there are ethical meaningful other forms of research misconduct. In applied sciences domains the problems of falsifying data, brevetting unviable devices or designing variation of existing ones, unethical research procedures and deontology of research methods are the major ethical stake.

At moral level, the unethical conduct means suppressing the other forms of creativity or promoting unfairly the personal or group paradigm. This phenomenon is made possible by social power structures manifesting in the higher education system and academic settings. We are living in an epoch of huge cultural transformation brought by cultural movements of postmodernism. The Enlightenment Western model of institutions and (scientific) knowledge were reassessed though a critique of meta-narratives, questioning the method and evaluation, and focus upon power relations and hegemony. From this perspective the problem of unethical research conduct and academic integrity looks much broader. The academic imperialism of western world the market-like development and competitions between universities and research institutions are not an ideological Marxism of communist regimes any more, but it is denounced from within by anthropologists, feminists and deconstructivists altogether. They expose the hidden cultural and social side of academic integrity: the bigoted scientific dialog, discriminatory collaboration and inequitable dissemination and promotion of research results (see, for example, the Mathew effect in academy) (Merton, 1968; Popoveniuc, 2015). All these flaws of modern academic institution seem to be due to the gradual change in ethical paradigm: the relinquishment of character virtue ethics in the favor of collective-deontological driven ethics and individualistic-utilitarian

perspective on moral. The lack of self-reflexive ethical culture of research and teaching is the major problem of modern university. At the present level of knowledge development, in such interrelated collective informational environment made possible by technological progress, the cultural level of the highest institution academia is far behind. The modern teachers and research fail the test of self-reflexive moral competence. As consequence, the University is in great danger to lose its chief rationale, that of the outpost of the cultural and moral progress of mankind and to degenerate in a merely workforce training establishment of a market-driven society. This ineluctable course can be changed only if the scholars, researcher, and students will become aware that the underrated ethical dimension of research and teaching represents the most important feature of the University as modern institution and its *raison d'être*.

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