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University systems in Russia and France: political autonomy and scientific efficiency.

Introduction

It is common to perceive the present state of affairs as natural, forgetting that each status quo has been composed of a number of conflicts and compromises. The knowledge of historical dynamics and the use of comparative perspective, in turn, may both be destructive and emancipating, since many taken-for-granted convictions require reconsideration in the piercing light of the alternative. This essay aims to juxtapose the power relations within different educational systems in order to find reliable alternatives to the wide spreading excessive control over universities (Altbach, 2001; Berdahl, 2006). It will be argued that the autonomy of scholars and students is more beneficial for the academic enterprise than excessive state or corporate control. Following the logic of *most-different-systems* design (Porta, 2008), the empirical data for this argument will consist of research on Russian (most-controlled) and French (least-controlled) academies. To narrow the scope of the argument, it will focus on sociology as an institutionalized discipline.

To contextualize the tension between the democratic and autocratic structures of power in education, it is necessary to point to the generic functions of contemporary education. First and foremost, education serves for concealing the reproduction of social hierarchies (Nash, 1990). The dominant culture is the culture of the dominant and the legitimation of socio-economic inequalities is achieved through the transmission of this culture. It means, that power relations inside the academy and between the academy and other social institutions are structured in a way that allows the most efficient reproduction of existing inequalities by presenting them as a result of one's learning efforts. Secondly, the education of contemporary industrial societies serves to satisfy the need for a competent labor force. For this, it is required that future workers are taught in a standardized way to avoid misunderstanding in the complicated industrial production and service (Gellner, 2008). Universities and schools are therefore required to follow the standards issued by governments and corporations (Nazaykinskaya, 2020). Thirdly and finally, since the dynamics of capitalism lead to ecological disasters and social insecurities, there is an expectation that education will address some of the problems by life-long and problem-based learning (Becker, 2015; Dekker, 2021; Kontowski, 2016). Therefore, educational programs should follow the agenda, framed by international governmental and non-governmental organizations as well as the multinational corporations and finance sectors. These three functions -- social reproduction, supply of standardized labor force, and solving of global problems frame the discussion of internal politics of educational systems.

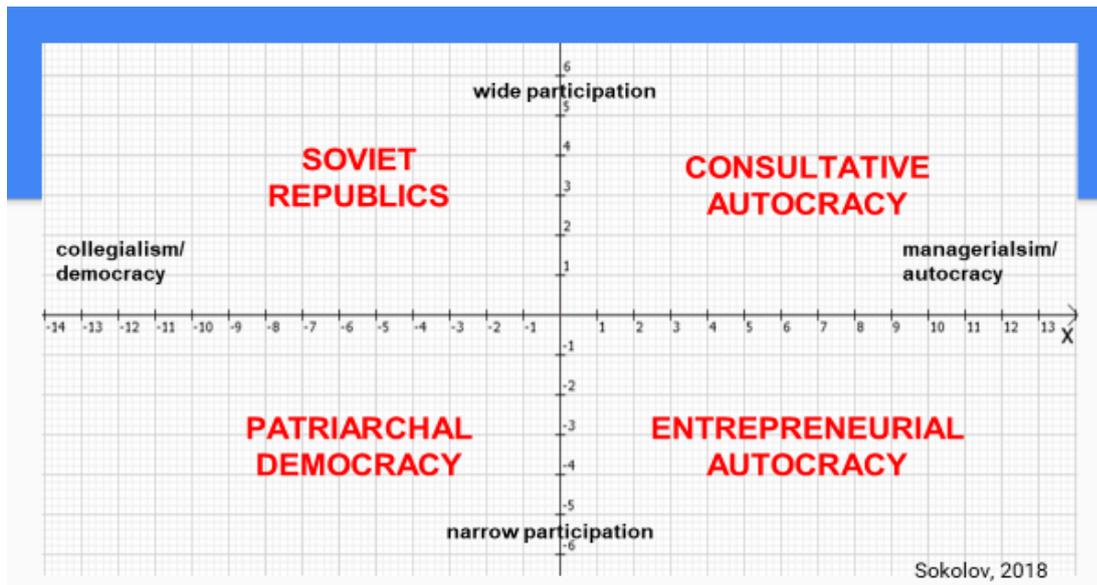
At the same time, there is an internal dynamic of power relations within the academy that is susceptible and yet not totally dependent on external agents as state, society, and corporations.

As Bourdieu and Passeron put it, relative autonomy is delegated to the “School” (that is the entire educational system) so that “School” can better perform its functions of reproducing the social hierarchies (Nash, 1990). It is a mistake to think that, for instance, the state’s necessity for industrialization necessarily results in the perforating submission of universities to the government. Accordingly, the absence of juridical influence of the corporation on the educational institutions does not mean the actual independence of the faculty members and administrators from the needs of industry (Sokolov et al., 2018). Academic institutions could in fact represent the variety of power structures as long as they perform the assigned functions. It is necessary, therefore, when proposing the alternatives of power relations within universities to hold the functions constant. Otherwise, if the proposed alternative would endanger the generic functions of education, it will not be viable in a given situation and require a more complex solution concerning not only education but the power relations in general.

Analysis

Russian universities have a comparatively short history, which is interesting for the multiple struggles between state’s encroachment on academic freedoms and academy’s resistance to protect them, mainly through struggling for political autonomy. In principle, the arguments about control and autonomy are more prevalent in this context than are power relations inside universities. However, as it was stated, the power structure of an academy is not the total equivalent of its relation to the state or industry. Russian universities have never been independent of the state, and neither were they governed totally by professors and students. The space for autonomy opened after 1917 collapsed in Stalin’s time and the same happened in Putin’s time after 15 years of relative independence began in the 1990s. As for 2022, most universities in Russia are funded, controlled, and censored by the state, frequently with the aid of the secret police. Needless to say, it has a great impact on the internal politics of universities, typically in the form of shrinking the opportunities for horizontal cooperation, access to funding, and decision-making.

Analyzing universities as political organizations, Russian sociologists Mikhail Sokolov and colleagues have elaborated the two-dimensional model that allows explaining the success and failures of many academic enterprises (Sokolov et al., 2018). According to Sokolov, all universities could be categorized based on the collegialism-to-managerialism division in assignment to a position (X-line) and narrow-to-wide participation in decision-making (Y-line). It is claimed that Russian universities, in comparison to the American ones, are closer to the Fordist model that assigns a concrete executor for every task with the minimum of collective procedures. In the period from the 1990s to the beginning of the 2000s Russian universities were able to elect rectors on the faculty conferences, and yet, the state took over, and currently, rectors are appointed. It allows Sokolov to classify Russian universities as a mixture of consultative autocracies (since appointed managers often seek the consultation of faculty in multidepartment universities) with the entrepreneurial autocracies (since, eventually, the engagement of faculty in preparing and making decisions is very limited).



The logic underlying this type of state control exposes the conflict between two concepts of educational institutions: state establishment and a community of scholars. In the first case, universities are conceived (both in the juridical and cognitive senses) in order to perform the function established from the outside. The control is therefore located not within the group of professors -- it may rather belong to the Ministry, industrial representatives, and people that they appoint. In the second case, the locus of control is within the self-governed confederation of scholars and, occasionally, students. There are, of course, variations and intersections, since universities may preserve their horizontal structures (Academic Councils) and yet have their rectors appointed by the country's president rather than selected. In any way, the juxtaposition of the "community" model and "state establishment" model allows explaining the political dynamics of Russian universities, that after 2015 lost their right to elect the managers yet preserved their internal democratic traditions. It is frequently argued though that university should be governed in a centralized manner not due to the functions that the state expects them to perform, but simply because of their large size (Kuzminov & Yudkevich, 2021).

Problematization

The false premise that guides many adepts of autocratic management of education is that centralization of power and control are positively related to academic achievements, and performance of the aforementioned generic functions. When the science is curated by professional bureaucracy rather than from fellow scientists it is hard to guarantee that the produced result will be scientific. Further, the problem that the undemocratic models of governing universities have is in the alienation that scholars are subject to. The external locus of control, if borrowed from developmental theories, may deprive people of feeling responsible for the activity, and hence, decrease their motivation (Deci et al., 1994; Grolnick & Ryan, 1989, 1989; Jacobs & Eccles, 2000). Excessive control can undermine the intrinsic motivation of engaging in any activity and encourage extrinsic and instrumental motivations (Richardson, 2015). The latter is the fair predictor of imitation, embodied, for example in the cheating or even the "disengagement compact" between students and teachers, when no one is bothering

no one (Cone, 2018). Despite strong arguments that could be voiced in favor of further problematization -- of the state's role or capital's role in controlling education -- they will not be developed here. The following proposal will keep untouched the current context of the conglomerate of authoritarian government and big business and show the appropriates of democratic models even within this system.

Proposal of an alternative

Despite the relative independence from the state and corporations and democratic model of internal governance, such universities as Oxford, Cambridge, and Bologna perform remarkably in academic terms (Berdahl, 2006). They are equally strong in performing the functions of social reproduction (by certifying people of high origin to withhold their privileged position), supplying of the labor force (to cultural, economic, and political institutions), and addressing global issues. Russian universities, in contrast, achieve lesser ranks despite numerous yet failed attempts by the Ministry of Education to raise the positions of the country's universities in the international rankings (Mäkinen, 2021). To explain such phenomena, it's time to turn to the more nuanced description of the French, "community" model of governance juxtaposed to the Russian, "state establishment" model. The argument will be illustrated, but not limited to the example of French sociology.

- 1) **Membership.** The key advantage of French sociology over the Soviet/Russian one is that its reproduction is ensured "not by officials outside the discipline, but by the producers of sociological knowledge" (Bikbov, 2009. p.128). The scholarship -- both research and teaching promotion is issued by the National Committee of Universities, which consists of the elected staff of academic institutions. This system allows French sociology to establish a strong epistemological foundation independent from external clientele in the face of state or corporations.
- 2) **Administration.** The sociologist Alexander Bikbov, the prolific translator of Bourdieu to Russian, points to the very essential difference in the meaning of "administration" (Bikbov, 2009). For French sociology "administration" refers to the *procedure*, while in Russian sociology -- to *position*. The difference is in whether the organization generates separate officialdom (Soviet/Russian case) or not (French case). Consequently, the officialdom may possess a monopoly on awarding scholarships, distributing budgets, and promoting within "its" institutions, being accountable only to the external stakeholders. In contrast, the routine administrative procedures in the most prestigious universities such as Oxford, Cambridge and Bologna are performed by the collective self-governed bodies of peers -- that is why Mikhail Sokolov and colleagues, somewhat paradoxically, characterized them as "Soviet republics" (Sokolov et al., 2018).
- 3) **Production of knowledge.** The ultimate question is how these democratic power structures can produce knowledge or social agents sufficient to perform the three generic functions of education. As long as French sociology follows the definition of Bourdieu that science is the process of recognition by peers, the various mechanics of peer-review are in use. From the very beginning, Durkheim and Moss aimed at

establishing solid methodological foundations for sociology. That means, that no professional bureaucrat can take the decision about the production of knowledge or promoting a scholar, since the methodological, and generally, epistemological foundations are preserved by scientists. The cost of this autonomy is therefore in the scientific rigor that eventually results in outstanding scientific results. In such a case it is fair to expect the high internal motivation in scholars in comparison to Russian colleagues that are taught to satisfy the clients, not to make science (Bikbov, 2009).

Finally, this is doubtless that social groups tend to reproduce the act of their emergence, and yet it doesn't mean that path-dependent effects are impossible to overcome. In this vein, Russian sciences and especially sociology may lack their epistemological foundations and be dependent on external order, since the very emergence of disciplines was due to the state establishment in czarist or Soviet times. On the contrary, French disciplinary communities trace their roots back to the XII century when scholars were organized in the free associations. In our times the autonomy of the French academy (or precisely sociology) serves as a shield against commercialization and managerialization. However, the problem of the Russian academy may not be in the fact of its establishment from above. Neither could be in the political will of the government to control science since the internal policy frequently remains untouched by the Ministry (Sokolov et al., 2018). The reproduction of individual, but also of institutional patterns of behavior in the academy could be altered only in the presence of a well-studied alternative. The unknown is often scary, and the elaboration and clarification of alternative models may play an emancipating role for Russian scholars. Following Bourdieu, it must be said that what the Russian academy needs is self-reflection and auto-critique that would entail the reconsideration of an autocratic common sense.

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