



Review of the Thesis for the degree of Doctor of Science presented by Natalya Alexeevna Mihalchenkova on "Political Determinants of the Policy in the Sphere of Higher Education: Correlations of the Global and National" (Saint Petersburg State University 2018)

The dissertation presented by N.A. Mihalchenkova combines a very deep knowledge of the history of higher education in several key states of the world with her experience in and understanding of the state policy in this field. It combines valuable historical analysis with the interesting proposals concerning the perspectives of state policy in the field of higher education, particularly in countries which undergo processes of overcoming the world hegemony of Western, mostly American, models of higher education. Its most valuable feature is a very interesting and provocative comparative analysis of the higher education policies of five BRICS states (Brazil, Russia, India, China and the Republic of South Africa). The selection of these countries reflects their common characteristics, such as: (a) they attempt to overcome the world hegemony of the United States and (b) their efforts to overcome previously existing social (class, caste, race) distances in the field of higher education.

The Author presents her very impressive mastery of scientific literature; the bibliography includes 560 sources in Russian, English and German. In addition to publication directly related to higher education, the author quotes the most important studies in the field of political science and sociology related to political development and social change.

The dissertation has a logical construction. It is divided in three chapters. The first chapter outlines the problems of higher education in the XXIst century, particularly the consequences of globalization and of the emergence of "knowledge-based society". In its last part the author raises the problem of national strategies of reforming higher education.

The second chapter raises the question of relationship between higher education and state policy. The author presents a very competent analysis of the history of higher education in three states: Germany, Russia (including the USSR) and the United States. Her knowledge and understanding of these three historical experiences is impressive.

When analyzing the reforms of higher education the Author stresses their impact on the social structure. Historically, institutions of higher learning had an elitist character and functioned as important channels of strengthening social inequalities. With the passing of time they became more open, with the rapid increase of the number of students. The Author correctly argues that this process failed, however, to produce full social equality. In reality the present systems of higher education based on broad recruitment tend to favor the middle class, which provides its children with the "social capital" necessary to successful advancement in the competitive reality of higher education. Identifying this phenomenon is one of the values of the dissertation.

The third chapter presents the history of educational reforms in five BRICS countries. The author stresses the growing importance of the BRICS countries in the world economy and politics as the counterbalance to the world hegemony of the United States and Western Europe. She also identifies the main problems facing each of the five countries, particularly the necessity to overcome

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negative consequences of the past (different in each of the five states) and to consolidate the position of each of the five states as regional powers with growing impact on their environment in all fields, including science and higher education.

The brief conclusion underlines the importance of the already existing co-operation between the BRICS countries and the need of their deepening in the future.

In her discussion of the history of higher education in selected countries the Author demonstrates high level of objectivity. She successfully identifies both the strong and the weak aspects of the German and American models of higher education, which she – to my way of thinking correctly – considers two alternatives more or less faithfully imitated in the higher educational systems of other states. Her analysis goes a long way to explaining the historical success of the (decentralized) model of American higher education and of the processes which resulted in the high place of American scientific institutions in the world.

The chapter on the history of higher education in Russia and the USSR is also very well written and informative. The history of the emergence of modern system of higher education in Russia has been documented in a very competent and interesting way. My main criticism of this part concerns the analysis of the Soviet period. The Author correctly listed the extravagancies of the early Soviet period and their overcoming in the nineteen-thirties. She, however, ignores the tragic consequences of the political developments of the late nineteen-thirties, particularly of mass terror which affected the institutions of higher education, and of the pseudo-scientific campaigns (like the infamous campaign against biogenetics) which retarded the Soviet scientific development for many years. She also seems to underestimate the negative consequences of the dominance of ideology in the Soviet system of higher education. It was particularly harmful in social sciences and humanities where it resulted in banning some disciplines (sociology, political science) and in transforming other in the ideological outlets of the ruling party. At the World Congress of Sociology in 1962, I had the opportunity to meet Pitrim Sorokin – at this time one of the great figures of American sociology. It was then that I realized how much the Russian sociology lost by his forced emigration, which was just a part of the tragic consequences of the political practices of the Soviet state on the social sciences of the USSR. The Author seems to underestimate the positive impact of political changes which took place in the USSR after 1956. It is in this late period of the USSR that successful efforts were made to correct the mistaken policies of the past, including the reemergence of sociology and of political science in the Soviet higher education. A brief reference to the reforms of late nineteen-eighties does not give full justice to the importance of the “perestroika” policies for the change that radically improved the Russian system of science and higher education. One of the general problems which this chapter touches upon (but does not discuss in length) is the relationship between the state ideology and higher education. The Soviet experience (copied in the other socialist states of this period) demonstrated that when the state attempt to use its power to impose ideological restrains on science and education the inevitably consequence is the lowering of scientific standards and weakening the position of the nation in the world rivalry. Paradoxically, the Author comes to such conclusions when discussing (in chapter 3) the experience of Chinese “cultural revolution” with its disastrous consequences for the higher education, but she failed to compare these extravagancies with the earlier experience of the USSR.

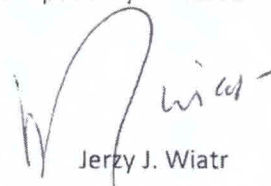
Chapter 3 is crucial for the whole dissertation as it provides the Author with the opportunity to compare higher education reforms in five BRICS countries. The Author makes it by presenting separately the experience in reforming higher education in each of the five countries. Her knowledge of the subject under discussion is impressive. She very skillfully identifies the main challenges facing each of the five states and resulting from nation-specific historical experiences. She also underlines common problems which have their roots in the past, particularly in the relative or absolute underdevelopment and of the traditional social structure marked by extreme social inequalities (in India, Brazil and the republic of South Africa). In the case of Russia and China the necessity to overcome the legacy of the past concerns the consequences of the communist dictatorship of the past. While Russia broke with this past directly and adopted a new political system, China remains officially a party-state, but with very important and interesting innovations in the way in which the system functions following the post-Mao reforms.

The Author believes that each of the five BRICS states has a strong potential for becoming the regional center of science and higher education with considerable influence on the other nations of their respective regions. In general, I believe, she is right. I have, however, some doubt about her assessment of the potential role of Russia in East-Central Europe. The Author believes that the historical ties between Russia and nations of this region prior to 1990 (including the knowledge of Russian language) should make closer co-operation feasible. Much as I should like to see this happen, I have serious doubts about this assessment. At present the major barrier existing between East-Central Europe and Russia is political. The negative developments in the mutual relations between most of the states of this region and the Russian Federation affect the co-operation in the field of science and higher education. With the passing of time also knowledge of the Russian language became less common than it had been the case in the older generation of scholars. What is badly needed is a conscious effort of governments to rebuild bridges of scientific co-operation. With the more independent position of the institutions of higher learning it is essential that they take active measures to improve the present situation.

My general assessment of the dissertation is very high. It is very well researched, based on profound historical knowledge and on a very good understanding of the dilemmas of conducting state policy in the field of higher education.

The thesis submitted by Natalya Alexeevna Michalchenkova "Political Determinants of the Policy in the Sphere of Higher Education" Correlations of the Global and National" corresponds to the requirements by the decree from September 01 2016 N 6821/1 "On the procedure of the award of the scientific degrees at the State University of Saint Petersburg". The candidate therefore deserves to be granted the scientific degree of Doctor of Science in speciality 23.00.02 – Political Institutions, Processes and Technologies (Political Science).

Warsaw, June 13, 2018



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