

Manipulated Research and Media

Interviews on Neoliberal
and Neoconservative Distortions

Jan Klán (ed.)



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Institute of the Czech Left
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distortions

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Introduction

Jan Klán

The weakening of tolerance of different currents of opinion in order to manipulate public opinion is a typical symptom in many countries of the European Union. The censorship of free speech and pluralism in the public sphere has strong economic sources and interests. Since the neoliberal capitalism promoted in Western countries is no longer very efficient, the living standards of many citizens are deteriorating. People are beginning to express strong dissent but the system does not want to hear it and responds with neoconservative censorship and repression.

To prevent various findings of social and political criticisms from reaching the public, research is being restricted so that these findings cannot be produced at all or at least are made more difficult to produce. Thus, there has been added the other vice, particularly the censorship of 'inappropriate' opinions, to the earlier neoliberal pressure for performance and profit and the overburdened bureaucratic procedures in science. Moreover, because of censorship, many times the public cannot get needed knowledge of the current political and economic manifestations of stagnation and crisis in the European Union and other Western countries and their contentious relations with other countries in the world.

This book of interviews addresses readers with both themes. It begins with debates about the manipulation of the media in public space and, then, it explores the manipulation of research with its relationship to public space and citizens. The interviews allow readers to understand the topic more easily than reading the articles. Indeed, conversation between people is a more natural way of communication than monological interpretations by

separate authors. At the same time, research texts by individual authors are very important for explaining new knowledge. But then, it is also good to communicate this knowledge through interviews which are more understandable to other people.

In my selection of authors for the interviews, first, I reflected on the book *Towards a New Research Era: Global Comparison of Research Distortions* (Brill 2023), edited by Marek Hrubec and Emil Višňovský and based on the previous work of the authors of the Centre of Global Studies in Prague and their foreign colleagues. "The book is focused on distorted research and university education in recent decades, and on alternatives for a new research era. It deals with the critique, explanation and normativity of bureaucratically, commercially and ideologically shaped humanities and social sciences. The authors analyze it in a ground-breaking way, putting the West in a global comparison with the non-Western world", the publishing house explains. The authors deal with problems, and some also outline possible remedies in Central Europe and Western countries and make comparisons with the situation in Africa, Latin America, India etc. My colleagues and I interviewed also several other respected experts who did not contribute to the mentioned book.

We interviewed authors who were born, raised, and live in several countries and continents: Europe (Czech Republic, Slovakia, Slovenia), Africa (DR Congo), North America (USA, Canada), Latin America and the Caribbean (Cuba) and Asia (India). Most of them are originally researchers from Europe.

Today, the world is very interconnected, sometimes harmoniously, sometimes controversially. This brings with it both positive and negative impacts in many countries. An example of the international and transnational impact on individual countries and citizens is the recent (2024) European Parliament election campaign in the common European public space. The sponsorship of campaigns of political parties and politicians by corporations is considered by many to be a corrupt act, albeit within the law.

This is to say nothing of the covert or overt support of the mass media, which invest a great deal of work, advertising space and money in manipulating public opinion and the public, the electorate in this case. However, the elections to the European Parliament are just one example, and the validity of this phenomenon is, unfortunately, of course, wider.

The European Parliament election campaign provides a good illustration of the manipulation of public space in many countries and also shows that this is a common European problem that needs to be tackled together. It demonstrates the need to co-create a common democratic political public in the European Union, in which citizens are not the manipulated targets of mass media campaigns paid for by corporations but are instead genuine democratic citizens with well-informed knowledge of politics, society, social issues, the economy, foreign affairs in the world, security, and the environment. It is precisely for this good knowledge that a high-quality research community is needed, free from the pressures of private corporate capital and its associated bureaucratic and political forces. High-quality research, especially in public academic institutions, could focus on topics that are important to the lives of citizens, especially those on low and middle incomes. Therefore, research should be well communicated to the wider public also through newspapers and journals. The link between citizens and researchers in the public sphere should be two-way (from citizens to researchers and from researchers to citizens) via many different ways, and not only random but also regularly organized discussions that can reflect the interests of citizens and states.

The interviews presented in this book bring together a plurality of left-wing views and critically link the public sphere in several EU countries through the common European theme of distorted knowledge in the sphere of academic expertise, newspapers and other media, and public opinion of citizens and voters. The book of interviews also connects public spheres in the

EU and a comparative global perspective, as we want to stress that the problematic power of transnational capital and neoliberal and neoconservative politics is not limited to isolated countries in Europe.

After some of the interviews were first published in various media outlets in a few European countries and the book of the interviews was created in the Czech and Slovak languages, now we bring a selection of them in English. This volume of interviews allows for the networking of researchers and journalists in the international public space in Europe and beyond. I hope it will provide readers with an enriching read.

How knowledge manipulations are performed

Jan Klán

Zbyšek Kupský: What role do manipulation and censorship play in today's mass media and how do they influence public discourse?

Jan Klán: I find the biggest problem is the lack of knowledge, some of which does not reach the public at all, and some of which does reach the public but in a manipulated form. Many citizens do not know who creates what opinions and how they are manipulated in favour of various power groups abroad with local repercussions. The creation of various fake news plays a significant role. Then, many people understandably find it difficult to navigate through it.

The entire public discourse is affected, with more critical political currents not getting adequate, or any coverage, in the media due to manipulation and censorship. The owners of capital, including the mass media, their journalists, and politicians try to exclude opponents they find unpleasant from the media and public space. This leaves a trace in public discourse, for example, in the impression that a political party no longer exists or is moribund and there is no point in voting for it. Let us hope that the current set-up in the countries of the European Union still has enough of the various procedural and legal defence mechanisms to remedy these undemocratic matters.

What is the relationship between media manipulation and democratic processes?

Manipulation in the media space can have immeasurable consequences for democratic decision-making by citizens in elections and for the entire democratic order. Especially when the

media are not transparent and not controlled. For these reasons, there are control mechanisms such as the Television Council and the Broadcasting Council in the Czech Republic, for example, which could play a positive role if they actually functioned.

However, the Internet contains very complex forms of communication, and the media in the EU countries are mostly influenced by capital, the owner of the media. The media are largely controlled by the oligarchs and spread their agenda accordingly. They write for their allied political ideologies or directly for political parties and movements. Some of them try to be more or less rational in their criticism, others are aggressive and manipulative. Either way, it is about manipulating public opinion and, thus, the democratic decision-making of citizens through capital.

There are various manipulations and concealments of facts in the media, where half-truths and lies are also created. The media can easily and quickly manipulate society with various stories and articles. I see the greatest danger in social media where emotions are played with, which can greatly sway voter preferences. Both positively and negatively. All of this greatly influences decision-making during election campaigns and, then, directly in elections. Recently we have seen this in the campaigns and debates ahead of the European Parliament elections, for example.

In the infamous Cambridge Analytica case, how did the firm use data and algorithms to manipulate public opinion and political preferences?

The British company collected data from Facebook users. That would not be the biggest problem but it started collecting the data of users' friends without their consent. Based on the data collected from tens of millions of Facebook users in the US, it was able to influence the 2016 presidential election in favour of Donald Trump.

But that was not the only transgression. It actively tried to influence the elections in Kenya and Nigeria as well, for example.

Cambridge Analytica used data and algorithms to manipulate public opinion and political preferences, primarily by collecting vast amounts of personal data about users from social platforms. This information included preferences, online behaviour, political opinions, and other sensitive data.

Then, Cambridge Analytica used sophisticated algorithms and data analysis to create profiles of individual users. These profiles were used to target political ads and social media content designed to influence users' opinions and behaviour. This process allowed the company to reach specific groups of people with personalized messages that were designed to elicit the desired response.

The manipulation of public opinion and political preferences through data and algorithms was often associated with controversial campaigns that used emotional appeals, misinformation, and manipulative polarization of society. These practices have raised concerns about privacy and the distortion of democratic processes, leading to a broad debate about regulating the use of personal data in a political context. But let us be under no illusion that the exposure of the case has prevented further manipulations. New technologies bring new possibilities. The creation of various fake news and videos using artificial intelligence is likely to have a significant impact on voting behaviour as well.

What are other economic and ideological issues raised by the use of personal data and psychographic analysis for political purposes?

Personal data is very vulnerable to misuse. We know from the past of many leaks on the Internet and their subsequent misuse. Not only Cambridge Analytica but also various Internet corporations, as well as the US surveillance agency, the NSA, for example, have had a hand in all this. In the European context, these problems have given rise to the concept of GDPR where you have to agree to the handling of personal data. It has to be said that, in a way, the

European Commission is trying to partially restrict the owners of social networks from handling the sensitive data of their users. Personal data can be misused very quickly indeed.

As far as psychographics are concerned, i.e. determining a person's mood by the means of his or her images, here, too, artificial intelligence can easily detect how you are feeling at a given moment and serve you a certain type of advertisement accordingly. This can also be used for political purposes. Electoral campaigns in recent times have been built more and more on emotions, and those who can work with them can also make political capital out of them.

On economic issues, it can be seen that multinational Internet corporations and others who are linked to them, including retail chains, benefit from the obtained personal data. The commercial logic in this case is clear. To make more profit, to privatize, or to use state finance and influence to do so. This leads to a redirection of power from popularly elected parliaments to narrow groups of people (oligarchy) owning and managing corporations, which sometimes have budgets larger than many states.

How does surveillance capitalism affect the information environment and freedom of speech?

The concept of surveillance capitalism is a phenomenon that has become more prominent after 2000 with the widespread use of the Internet. I have already mentioned this in part. It is linked, in particular, to Google, which came up with the idea of extracting data from Internet users, which it can then use to target advertising. The biggest growth came with social networks where users store a lot of data, posts, photos, etc. All of these things Google or any other company can use at will. They warn you about it in the terms of service. Customer cards or mobile phone apps also can be an integral part of surveillance capitalism. This all can collect your data and offer you tailored advertising. You are then manipulated into a position of need by the corporations which in effect starts

many people listening to them. Gradually they buy things they don't need because the advertising keeps offering them.

Circumventing the display of ads through various blocking programs is possible but surveillance capitalism severely limits them. Surveillance capitalism restricts our freedom of choice, and it also restricts our freedom of speech, because it shapes it by constantly showing us advertisements. We live in a kind of authoritarianism.

Imagine a corporation that continually showed you false advertising. If it is repeated a thousand times, it will become the truth for many people, which is, of course, very dangerous. We will be living in a virtual reality enhanced by artificial intelligence tools that will not be in tune with human intelligence. What will happen then? A major problem that may lead to a threat to humanity itself, to use the interpretation of Toby Ord, author of the book *The Precipice: Existential Risk and the Future of Humanity*.

What are the implications of the current media funding model for the objectivity and independence of news reporting?

In the Czech context, for example, we can observe three types of media. The first type is public media, which includes Czech Television and Czech Radio. These are financed by the licence fees and by this logic are supposed to be independent media that report objectively and pluralistically. However, it often happens that this is not the case. In various political programs, government representatives are preferably invited, less so representatives of the parliamentary opposition, and even less so the extra-parliamentary opposition. It has already been noted that some editors admit to siding with this or that political representation, even though they are supposed to be professionals and thus not partisan. It would be worth considering a change to the Czech Television Act to make it more objective and to provide a balanced and critical view of current affairs.

The second type of media is the oligarchic media which is owned by Czech oligarchs, such as Zdenek Bakala, Ivo Lukacovic, Renata Kellnerova, etc. These media are primarily financed by advertising and, in the vast majority, they also write positively about those who pay them. And about their owners. These are media tycoons who influence public opinion and therefore politics. They often try to help one or other political representation, which then represents them instead of representing the citizens. A similar model was known from the various cases surrounding the media mogul Rupert Murdoch. Oligarchic media are therefore not independent but primarily dependent on their owners. They are usually part of a big transnational business that is controlled by the owners and politicians in the US and their allies and vassals.

Then, there is a third type of media which I call "independent", which lives essentially on various contributions from its small contributors, mostly readers. This type of media is proving to be more transparent and objective because it is not dependent on advertising and the oligarchy.

Can you give a recent example of censorship in conjunction with the government?

In the Czech Republic, we have seen censorship restrictions after Russia's intervention in Ukraine, when the Supreme State Prosecutor interpreted the law in the media and said that anyone who approves of the conflict in Ukraine can be sentenced. Fear of this criminalisation has led to many experts and journalists being afraid to speak out critically, preferring to take a back seat on the issue. Some also resorted to self-censorship and began to question their own past claims.

Several news websites and other platforms were shut down as a result of government intervention. Fortunately, a court recently ruled this illegal. This is an important message to the government and a stop to its authoritarian tendencies.

Let us hope that this onset of censorship and silencing of other, alternative views will not escalate any further. Otherwise, the government could slide into even more dangerous authoritarian practices than it has already introduced.

How can the public be informed about hidden manipulation and censorship in the media so that they can form an informed opinion?

Most of the time, unfortunately, this only happens when the media finds a scandal. The media is supposed to be the proverbial watchdog of democracy but most of the time the mainstream media is not. Increasingly, we are seeing the rise of the mediaocracy. That is a process whereby the media shape public opinion and discourse, often with unsubstantiated things.

In the past, there have been several cases in the Czech Republic that have had major consequences, the Vrbětice case, for example, where Russian agents were supposed to have blown up an ammunition depot but precise evidence was never produced. Or before that, the Kubice report was fabricated against the social democratic party, alleging that organized crime was infiltrating Czech politics. These practices are referred to as "cold coups" where there is an attempt to change the ruling establishment. These things are known from Latin America but they are also reaching European countries through media pressure.

Citizens are only able to form an informed opinion when they have the opportunity to be exposed to a plurality of opinions and doubts. The bad option is when censorship sets in and critical voices are silenced. The plurality of opinion is needed in society in order to develop critical thinking and enable democratic decision-making by citizens.

Both Social and Research Changes Are Needed

Marek Hrubec

Roman Janouch: You have more than 25 years of experience in research and higher education. That is why you and your colleagues have probably taken on such a challenging topic as the distorted knowledge of societies and its alternatives. What should the new era of science and research consist of?

Marek Hrubec: A new era of research with an alternative conception that could be a better way of knowing gradually comes from solving the serious flaws in the economy, politics, and society. Research and its standards have been problematized, declining gradually as private companies and their sponsored politicians have pushed for the neoliberalization of the economy and society since the 1980s, first in the US and the UK, and then in other countries. My colleagues and I focus on a global comparison of these processes.

In the book *Towards a New Research Era* you co-edited, the global comparison of research distortions and their alternatives deals with various parts of the world, particularly in the West, Latin America, China, India, Africa, etc. First, how have neoliberal policies been gradually applied in Western countries and Central Europe respectively, particularly in research?

There was the privatisation of enterprises and the emphasis on profit as the top priority at the expense of the employees and the majority of citizens. Problems in research and knowledge more generally subsequently began to derive from these economic factors. In Britain, for example, there has been the charging of

fees for higher education and the commercialisation of public research institutions since the late 1990s under Tony Blair. Here, in Central Europe, some of these problems in research only began to permeate more strongly after 2000, after neoliberal capitalism took hold in the economy in the 1990s.

The neoliberal model of research has led to an increasing emphasis on profitability, or more precisely, on trying to transfer research knowledge as quickly as possible into commerce and production in a technocratic way, primarily for the sake of private company profits. This is closely related to the provision of research through short-term grants, whereby the researchers in public academic institutions are also supposed to become businessmen who must strive to obtain as much grant money as possible. If a researcher is not a good fundraiser, he or she often cannot succeed properly. Some of the major researchers in history would not succeed today and would not even win a Nobel Prize, because they may be excellent researchers but they have not been fundraisers and bureaucratic managers.

At the same time, there is quantitative pressure to publish many outputs, mainly in journals registered on the databases of Western private corporations, particularly the Web of Science, so it is again about profit. However, this technicist approach in the economy, society, and research, driven by the ideology of profit, is alienated from the social and other needs and interests of citizens and their democratic participation in decision-making.

But nothing grows to the sky. Where does the neoliberal model experience its limits?

During the global financial and economic crisis of 2008, the neoliberal model crashed and ceased to be viable even in the eyes of many of its proponents. Instead of a proper transformation, however, its creators have subsequently introduced ordoliberalism, where the state (the state order) is used to promote neoliberal interests, resulting in certain neoconservative

restrictions, such as limiting trade with certain areas of the world, international sanctions, militarisation, restrictions on freedom of speech and repression in public space, research and elsewhere. All of this is reflected in the increase in international and global tensions, in the deterioration in the living standards of citizens in developed countries, in poverty and the millions of deaths due to hunger and disease in developing countries, and in the threat of world war.

How are these problems moving beyond the borders of Western countries? Research on these problems in Africa must have been of special importance to you, by name, in that you were the first rector of a development university there years ago on the border of Burundi and DR Congo, and you have also done research in other countries, such as Ethiopia and Nigeria.

Yes, I have some professional and personal experience with Africa. It is a very complex topic but I can at least outline something. It requires an understanding of the context as well. Although Africa is united by its common characteristics, it is also important to remember that it is a large continent with many different parts and cultures. It is very diverse with a greater plurality of problems than in Europe. Africa today has a population of more than 1.4 billion people, i.e. more than three times the population of the European Union, and by 2100, according to demographic projections, it is expected to have between 3 and 4 billion inhabitants.

Unless it becomes uninhabitable for climatic reasons by then. But otherwise, yes, the population there is growing steadily so far, and Nigeria is even being talked about as the next most populous country on the planet.

Nigeria has over 200 million people today, and some development scenarios talk about over 700 million people around 2100. Either way, both significant population growth and climate

crisis can bring major problems, including other conflicts, although a larger population can also mean opportunities, economic and other ones.

However, there were already problems with the implementation of research in Africa before, when there were not so many people living there: from the destruction of the indigenous societies in the colonial period, through its unresolved consequences in the post-colonial era, to the following period of global neoliberalism when problems were already reproduced and created in the other ways mentioned. According to the UN Economic Commission for Africa, 54.8% of the global poor currently live in Africa. 695 million people there are already in poverty or at risk of falling into poverty.

That certainly limits resources for research in Africa.

Yes. Because Africa is being sucked dry as a global periphery in terms of resources and people, it is very underfunded. Research there usually suffers not only from the foreign-imposed emphasis on neoliberal profit and neoconservative politics but also from a lack of funding. The chapter of our book devoted to this topic illustrates the problem very graphically with the example of the pandemic, where scientific research on COVID-19 and the associated treatment, not only through vaccines, was underfunded. Africa had only minimal potential to cope with the disease, including few vaccines and other drugs compared to other parts of the world, especially Western countries. Add to this the fact that many Africans, after their experience of the bitter colonial and recent past, were reluctant to be vaccinated because they feared that various experiments might be applied to them. They argued with incredulity that we are not guinea pigs. Fortunately, due to the relatively high percentage of young and, thus, healthier population in Africa, the pandemic did not have the negative impact that the initial reaction to the disease feared.

But add to the problems mentioned the lack of recognition of African traditional medicine, which existed and still exists to some extent, but has been largely eroded along with the whole African epistemology and has so far failed to be revitalised to any great extent.

India, the most populous country on the planet, is similarly situated, right? I am referring to the main characteristics, otherwise, of course, I realize that there are also many differences.

India is indeed in some ways a similar case to Africa. Despite poverty reduction, it is still the country with the largest number of poor people in the world, particularly 228 million people at the time of our research. India is also marked by its British colonial past, the anti-social consequences of which the Indians tried to overcome with their quest for democratic socialism after the country's independence. Since the 1990s, however, there has been a rise in neoliberalism, recently under President Modi, and under a certain quasi-traditionalist, neo-conservative guise. The concept of the New Education Policy 2020 seeks to increasingly privatise universities and, given the number of students there, represents a bulky education industry with large profits. Yet previous privatisation has not contributed to improving the quality of higher education and has been problematic in terms of access and inclusion of students from lower income groups.

The analysis in your book suggests that Russia and Latin America have also gone through a process of commercialization of research, yet it hasn't caught on as much there. In Russia, neoliberalism has partly taken hold, partly they've just imitated it there to succeed in international competition. But let me ask you about Latin America, which is more socially innovative and has become almost a second home for you. You have worked in Brazil, Cuba, Mexico, Colombia, Chile, and Uruguay. What led you to these areas?

Your interest there probably started years ago with your experience with the World Social Forums in Brazil.

The previous research and the World Social Forum in Brazil were at the beginning because of the research on innovative social experiments there, such as participatory budgeting, new social programs, and various local and global fora. People have been really socially and civically active there, including grassroots democracy.

Cuba has been in the process of transformation too, particularly the updating of its economic model. Under its socialist model, they still prefer state planning and public ownership but combine it with a regulated market and private ownership of small and medium-sized enterprises.

In addition, my recent work with African colleagues has inspired me to undertake further, this time not only with colleagues from Africa but mainly from Latin America. This is not just another university, this time I cooperate with the whole platform of research and educational institutions in Latin American countries that can analyse older and contemporary emancipatory social and political experiments there.

Is that why you're emphasizing Latin America?

Yes, I see the need for these experimental activities there and the political possibilities of implementing them. Currently in the second left tide, in most countries there, they have focused on making research serve the higher standard of living of the citizens. Throughout the macro-region, we can see the emphasis on social issues, poverty eradication, and thus on education and research, which should now contribute more to low- and middle-income groups.

What about China? Is it where many in the world see the hope of standing up to contemporary Western hegemony?

In the case of China, it's interesting that the country has long tried to catch up with the West in research, adopting very much Western ways of doing research, with their pros and cons. Researchers there have tried to establish themselves in Western universities and publish in Western journals and publishing houses, and they have succeeded.

However, they have gradually begun to introduce a re-organisation there, a reform, which, in the current process of implementation, is leading to the fact that in China, on the one hand, they want to continue to engage with the world, especially developed Western research, while at the same time focusing more and more on their own domestic subject areas, according to their own criteria, so that this is primarily conducive to the development of the people and the country. They strive for balance. We shall see to what extent they succeed. Overall, they already have the largest number of patents per year (more than any other country in the world) and also the most impacted peer-reviewed articles. The new priorities seek to apply these mainly domestically and to establish new thematic areas of research, while further developing well-developed global cooperations.

So what is a better research understanding of society that is free from neoliberalism, bureaucratization, and neoconservative restrictions on freedom? It's a challenging and serious problem and one that you have long addressed at your Center of Global Studies. What to do about it?

In terms of alternatives, we derive them from solutions to the problems mentioned. In societies that declare that they seek to fulfill the needs and interests of citizens, we expect that research knowledge of society in public institutions should be linked to the fulfillment of the social needs of citizens and to the development of their standard of living and to enable them to participate more democratically in the civic life of society, rather than public research institutions being distorted and corrupted according to the criteria of private profit and managerial distrust linked to

bureaucratic and ideological discipline. There should be more emphasis on systematic institutionalized funding of public research institutions rather than fragmented grants, on prioritizing public journal databases rather than private companies, on quality rather than quantity with sub-par productivity, on respecting plurality of interpretations without suppressing them.

Overcoming anti-scientific tendencies may not be easy but a different research world is possible. This must be taken into account not only at the national level but also in international research teams and institutions. In doing so, however, it is necessary to respect the different conceptions of research in different countries and regions according to their systems and cultures.

For such a transformation, however, change in research alone is not enough; it requires a whole societal change. Both social and research changes are needed. We need societal change that includes research change so that they complement each other. In this way, it will be possible to make the transition to a new research era.

I hope the interview about research on social problems here and around the world can help citizens see the wider context and good efforts in other areas of the world. This can contribute to social and research transformation for the better.

On Neoliberal Distortions of Research

Emil Višňovský

Pavol Dinka: In the joint introduction to *Towards a New Research Era*, a book co-edited with Marek Hrubec, you point out that ‘the commercial, ideological, and bureaucratic distortion of academia stems from neoliberal imperatives developed in the UK and the US from the late 1970s and early 1980s onwards,’ which have gradually spread to other countries. In both academic and educational institutions, this has been manifested as efforts to transform researchers into academic entrepreneurs or capitalist managers, who must raise funds through grants or unfair solicitation. What has this led to up to the present day?

Emil Višňovský: Neoliberal academic capitalism is a system of operating academic institutions aimed at transforming them into ‘engines of economic growth.’ Capitalism has understood and came to embrace that it is an intellectual rather than a physical labour that provides and drives profit. Therefore, it is doing everything possible to dominate this labour. The substance here is ‘economism,’ a paradigm reflected in all aspects of these institutions’ activities. In the field of management, for example, this might mean ‘managerialism,’ i.e., managing a university or an academy just like any other corporation. It also includes ‘monetarism,’ i.e., evaluating everything in financial categories. To put it simply, academic activity must be economically ‘paid back.’ It cannot incur financial loss and must not only have ‘costs’ but also provide ‘revenues’ and generate ‘profits,’ primarily or ultimately of a financial merit. To this end, various ‘measurable indicators’ are created to assess ‘effectiveness’ in the form of ‘quantitative outputs,’ the most famous of which is the ‘number

of publications and citations.’ It is clear that not all academic fields have, or can have, a direct or any other relation to economic growth and profit. Those that do not—with the humanities and social sciences as classic examples—are gradually ostracized, even eliminated, by these economic and financial instruments. This has become a globally dominant model, against which the academic communities have been protesting for decades, without much success. Here in Slovakia, this model has not yet fully established itself; however, it has already taken roots, and developments continue in this direction. The economic function is far from being the only, or even the main, social function of academic institutions and their various components.

In your book chapter on ‘The Creativity Imperative’, you discuss the relationship between the intellectual and institutional dimensions of contemporary academic institutions, specifically, the relationship between the goal and the means to that goal. In the first stage, you mention the years 1945–1975. How would you characterize this period?

After World War II, there was a new development of academic institutions in a global context. In the West, this led to the so-called massification by the 1960s, characterized by a large increase in both the number of undergraduates and the number of universities and professional academics. This expansion led to the transformation of elite institutions into mass institutions (in Slovakia, this occurred only after 1990) in accordance with the Robbins principle in Britain: university places "should be available to all who were qualified for them by ability and attainment". The post-war population explosion (the ‘baby boomers’ generation) also played a role. The demand for equal access to education was aligned with the needs of industry. The founding of new universities and the increase in number of students was met with enthusiasm, benefiting everyone, including academics. After the war, most countries were extensively investing in academia, and this phase is often referred to as the

‘golden era,’ not only in the US. During this time, traditional academic values and freedoms were more fundamentally preserved. They were openly discussed, and when they were threatened for political or bureaucratic reasons, for example, students came to defend them. This was evident in the well-known student protests of the late 1960s, not only in the USA but also in Europe and Japan. This was, in fact, the only stage in the post-war history of the academic sphere when it enjoyed support and recognition from society and the general public, including politicians and businessmen. This support helped to overcome the detachment of universities from societal life and state politics.

However, a turning point arrived at the end of the 1970s when neoliberalism and the free market came into play. There was a tendency to regard academic institutions, including universities, as private enterprises or factories, operating under the paradigm of delivering a ‘value for money.’ What is the fundamental difference between the first and the second stage? What impact has this had, and is still having, on the entire scientific and university sphere?

The academic sphere is not separate from social life and development. Even in academia, the advent of the neoliberal paradigm is associated with the policies of Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher, who believed this sphere was already in crisis in the 1970s due to massification, and thus needed reformation. According to Reagan, education is an ‘intellectual luxury’. Already in his speech after being elected the governor of California in 1967, he declared that, ‘taxpayers should not encourage intellectual curiosity’ and that universities should focus on shaping graduates’ job skills for future employment. His ‘Reaganomics’ stands for market fundamentalism with a minimal but authoritarian managerial state, imposing maximum privatization and strict control of public finances. The Thatcher government began its reforms in 1981 with radical financial cuts that threatened the existence of several colleges and continued

until 1985. The state abolished scholarships for international students and reduced study opportunities by thousands of places. This was particularly the case at older and larger universities, whereas the technical colleges had different priorities. The attack was directed against the ‘anti-business mentality’ of traditional academics and their institutions. Neoliberals cited economic inefficiency (especially of public academic institutions) as the root cause of all academic problems, proposing privatization and monetization as the primary solutions. Thus, the transformation of academia continued with its corporatization, marketization, commodification, and commercialization. The overall result is an academic world completely different from what traditional academics and non-academics have known for centuries. The institutional level, shaped by these processes, has taken over the intellectual level and, instead of allowing for its free creative development, it has begun to dictate it. Increasingly, the daily life and work of the great mass of academics began to take place within a consolidating neoliberal institutional framework that brought standardization, growing bureaucracy and formalization, as well as rigidity and uniformity of structures. Academics are forced to constantly compete for resources, defend their work, and prove its quality, effectiveness, or accountability to all parties. They have become ‘managed professionals,’ etc.

After 1989, a new rhetoric arrived in Czechoslovakia, with talk of a third way—something between socialism and capitalism. However, it soon became clear that this was, in fact, a restoration of capitalism, specifically its neoliberal version. The catchphrase became a mass movement towards anti-intellectualism — and towards money! How was this reflected in the intellectual and educational achievements of Slovak society?

Undoubtedly, for our academic sphere, November 1989 represented a fresh start. Long-desired for some and forced upon others. For yet another group, it meant an imminent or pending

end. Every major social upheaval—and this one was exactly that—is known to seriously affect human potential which is probably one of its intentions. In addition to providing opportunities to ‘new people’ and ‘weeding out’ those too closely associated with the previous regime, this sorting of ‘cadres’ or ‘ghosts’ carries several risks. Not only it can undeservedly intervene (when the ‘forest is being cut down’) but, more importantly, it threatens to weaken the ‘genetic’ intellectual potential of society. This is especially true if it affects those who are more experienced, better educated or, indeed, wiser, often for questionable reasons. By its nature, academia—or the intellectual sphere as such—is the most vulnerable here. The fact is that scholars, academics, and authentic intellectuals do not spring up overnight. It takes time for them to appear and mature. Therefore, the losses inflicted on society’s ‘intellectual fund’ are particularly unfortunate. The initial reaction of authentic academics to the post-November situation was a sense of liberation (‘now we will finally be able to do our work!’). Then a ‘recovery’ set in, involving two phases: a short one and a long one. The short phase involved necessary institutional reconstruction, legislative changes, and so on, while the long phase focused on the concept of higher education. However, the intellectual discussion on this in Slovakia was, and still up to our day is, minimal, if it exists at all — with the exception of the Slovak Academy of Sciences, where such discussions have been ongoing for several years concurrently with its transformation. A part of this ‘intellectual misery’ was initially the illusion that everything in the academic world to the west of us is just the ‘cutting edge and excellent,’ and that we must accept it ‘hook, line, and sinker,’ as well as an ignorance about what the academic system is actually about. Even our academic managers nowadays mostly have no idea what models of ‘managerialism’ they are promoting or what their purpose is. To put it simply, for over thirty years our academia (mostly universities) has either been stagnant or moving in the wrong direction. For example, the accreditation system imposed

by the Ministry demanded ‘everything from everybody’ instead of diversifying and differentiating the university network. Not to mention the misguided competition for placement in various ‘league tables,’ i.e., university rankings, and so on. The intellectual contribution of the academic sphere to shaping the intellectual culture of our society—which is one of its essential missions—is minimal. Thus, there has been no ‘renewal,’ ‘recovery,’ or ‘revival’ of our domestic intellectual environment. On the contrary, this lack of progress led me, along with some of my colleagues, to found the Internet initiative For Living Universities a few years ago.

You claim that neoliberal capitalism is the culmination of the instrumental relationship between knowledge and power, as well as knowledge and technology. Knowledge has come to be understood as global capital, generated by institutions specialized in the production and utilization of knowledge. What does this mean for scientific institutions and universities? How, then, can the development and quality of knowledge be assessed?

This state of affairs means that academic institutions—supposed to be creative intellectual entities with a mission to produce not only knowledge but also values and other intellectual ‘products’—are exposed to market forces and pressures. As a result, they are struggling, above all, to survive. In the first place, this means securing a certain amount of funding, if not for extended, then at least for simple or even a reduced self-reproduction in any form. This task has become the primary concern of all academic officials (managers), many of whom are still ‘classical academics’ with little competence in marketing, financial, or personnel management.

The room for maneuvering for these officials, especially in public institutions, is limited by state norms, particularly the rules for the distribution of the state subsidy for each calendar year. These rules are filled with absurd neoliberal ‘performance

standards' in the strange way that even rectors or deans have no idea what budget they will manage each year. The Ministry creates a 'quasi-market' by establishing a monopoly according to its own charts, in which it 'buys' the products of universities in the form of their publication outputs. This process is associated with an incredible amount of record-keeping bureaucracy. The incorporation of the field of knowledge and education into the general social and economic 'market' has led to a number of absurd consequences for this field. For example, there is a trend to treat students like any other 'customers,' 'clients,' or 'beneficiaries' of educational services, with academic staff as 'providers.' This is the purpose of various 'surveys' of student evaluations of teachers. The relationship between teacher and student is shifting from a pedagogical one to a 'quasi-market' one, and an 'academic market' is also emerging within academic institutions. Therefore, even PhD students, who are not yet finished academics (and many of them never will be), but are still third-level students, are forced to publish and contribute to the academic market. As a result of these mechanisms, this market is saturated not only with quantity but also, like any market, with an amount of muddled junk. A number of entrepreneurial entities—often called 'predatory'—have begun to feed on this marketization of academic products, picking up on the entrepreneurial opportunities inherent in the push for publications and other academic 'output.' These entities attract payments mainly from inexperienced academics, offering 'quick' publication, conference, or other academic services, allowing academics to 'register' and 'report' them. This is a form of academic corruption, against which institutions have long since begun to organize their own 'police'—for example, by creating proscribed lists of such 'predators.' For neoliberal managers, however, market indicators—who published what, where, and how much—mean everything, including measures of value and quality of academic work and its results. They are not really interested in the actual content of these results—that is, their

contribution to knowledge and education. The notion of ‘academic work’ (scientific, pedagogical, artistic, etc.), which is the only authentic measure of value, is an unfamiliar concept to them.

You ask how to bring science out of the ‘ivory tower’ and how to establish the imperative of creativity within it. You point out that, ‘if the creative intellectual potential of academics is blocked or even harmed, whether by economic or social pressures or political maneuvers, serious problems arise (...) Creativity must not be confused with different modes of ‘productivity’. What, then, awaits academics in a situation where, as wage-earners, they have been pushed into the corner of their workplaces and laboratories? How to reinforce the creativity itself?

The notion of creativity is equally unfamiliar not only to our contemporary academic officials and managers but, unfortunately, to our academics as well. Individual academics are primarily fighting for their survival—the preservation of their academic positions—which, rather than their creativity, depends on their ability to demonstrate the ‘performances’ or ‘outputs’ required in various ministerial or accreditation charts. These tables do not assess—sorry, ‘measure’—content and quality, but only quantity and ‘rank,’ i. e., the ranking of the result of the work in a set hierarchy. In this way, they even dictate and prescribe not only what academics have to publish (e.g., avoiding conference proceedings because they have almost zero ‘point’ and financial value in our country, unlike abroad), but also what they have to research (e.g., avoiding topics that have no chance of mass citation). Academics are under existential threat, forced to publish as much as possible in the shortest time (this is supposed to represent their ‘productivity,’ as in any other ‘production’). They are even evaluated based on the number of citations their work receives, as if citations depended on them as authors (no wonder that so-called citation clans are another form of academic

corruption). Administrators and evaluators take no account of citation practices and contexts, which vary from discipline to discipline. They are only interested in citation counts, which they even impose on academics themselves as a duty to track and report, like ‘medals’ on their chests once boasted by war veterans (or as if someone were asking Karel Gott to keep a record of his gold or platinum records, or Lionel Messi to keep a record of his goals and then present it to someone to justify their existence). This is all crowned by the fact that the results of academic work in Slovakia are evaluated by administrators and library staff, who were handed this power by academic officials and ministers about 20 years ago. It is the librarians who chart these results according to their registration criteria, which have nothing to do with the content of the academic work—its contribution to knowledge and education. Nor can they, because the value of an academic work can only be judged by competent academics in the field. This so-called ‘peer-review’ principle is applied only to a very limited extent, resulting in academics from individual disciplines not making decisions about their own disciplines or their quality. These decisions are made by administrative and managerial practices that have nothing to do with creativity and, moreover, directly destroy it. So, the question is not ‘how to reinforce creativity itself,’ but how to even begin to work with it, how to bring it back into academic practices. This requires a change in the entire academic system, not just its individual components. Unfortunately, there is now at least one entire generation of academics who believe that this neoliberal model is ‘normal’ and correct. The authentic homo academicus has been transformed into an academic homo economicus, and intrinsic motivation for academic work has been replaced by extrinsic motivation.

There is a lack of moral investment in science. Scientists are not given the social recognition they deserve, they are not heard, and even if they were, they have no chance to speak as academics since they are threatened with a raised finger. Yet,

it is the duty of science to question everything... except that the loudmouths—especially those in the political and media environment—won't allow it. The media and the so-called ethics committees have already done a lot of damage by telling you what you can and cannot say. Unfortunately (or thankfully), there is a growing number of academic dissidents. There is as much open discussion as there is gold dust. What is academia? What is a university? What is their core composed of? The left wing has always been the leader of intellectual discourse (e.g., A. Camus, J. P. Sartre). What has happened to it? Where has it gone? How do you answer these questions?

I could answer by saying that even academics are only humans—and humans come in all shapes and sizes. In my texts, I distinguish between ‘authentic’ academics with genuine academic motivations and identities, and ‘pseudo-academics,’ or, in other words, academic ‘personalities,’ and other academic staff. Knowledge and education themselves, as the main values to which academics dedicate their lives, are only one of the many instrumental values for other members of society. While for authentic academics it is the natural purpose of their lives (for non-authentic academics it is just a form of free-riding), for the state and business, it is a major tool for increasing economic growth. Nowadays, there is a shortage of ‘authentic’ academics and personalities who truly understand what it means ‘to be an academic.’ They are scholars, intellectuals, experts, specialists, scientists and artists. These authentic intellectuals are not limited to their alma mater or employer institution; they also present their views as citizens, serving as ‘public intellectuals’ with cultural or political influence on people's thinking. History has seen plenty of such figures, not only Camus and Sartre (who were intellectuals, though not academics), but also J. Dewey and B. Russell, who were primarily academics. Their academic roles did not prevent them from thinking and speaking professionally about

the problems of public and social life. In our domestic context, we can refer to L. Kováč or, today, E. Chmelár. The core of academia and the university is intellectual; it consists of cultivating an intellectual culture and thinking that is primarily disciplinary (developing within specific academic disciplines or fields), as well as inter- and multidisciplinary, and at the same time, independent. It does not enclose itself in an ‘ivory tower,’ but understands that the ultimate purpose of being an academic is to ennoble human existence, contributing not only to knowledge and education but also to the common good of all humanity. All the great academics, from Plato and W. Humboldt to N. Chomsky and others, have always been such humanists.

No scientist and no science can live and exist in a vacuum, outside of society, without certain moral and social boundaries. How do we find the boundary of freedom—from here to there?

I am not sure what boundary you have in mind, but this is probably about the relationship between society and the academic institution, or the relationship between the individual academic and society. I devoted several chapters in my ‘academic trilogy’ to this topic and hinted at it in my previous reply. What I would like to add is that what proves to be a problem today is the lack of respect for the relative autonomy of academia and academics. Of course, every academic institution is not there for itself, but for the society that establishes, finances, and has expectations of it. However, this does not mean that society has the right to fully dictate and orchestrate this institution. Unless a society has enough understanding and sense of the purpose of establishing an academy or university—which includes the cultivation of scholarship and education, professional research and exploration, free creative thinking, intellectual creation, etc.—and instead requires something else of it (e.g., financial gain or just ‘labour production’), it will not work. To put it simply, an academic institution is not a ‘factory, shop, or an office,’ as I have written

elsewhere. An academic institution has its own specificities, the most significant of which is creative intellectual work in its various forms and shapes. Without proper respect for this ‘core,’ we are in crisis and end up with a caricature as a result.

It turns out that we urgently need a revitalization of knowledge and to stop the manipulation. We need science without ideological impositions, without political dirigisme, and free of ideological directives on what and how scientists should think. We need science closely linked to the human being, their entire bios, and their future. How do you perceive the future of scientists from this perspective?

The future of academia is a great topic worthy of a separate monograph, which I haven't yet gotten around to writing (though I originally intended to). I completed my trilogy with just a few remarks or challenges, which I included under the term ‘creativity.’ There are academics (I believe in our country too, not just abroad) who have a similar understanding and sufficient self-reflection of their academic existence. Therefore, they know, for example, that producing academic work is their basic—and far from easy—professional duty, rather than amassing a multitude of publications and citations in various databases. We can cite a single idea (Cogito ergo sum) or a single formula ($E = mc^2$) as world-famous examples. Only therein lies the real scientific ‘feat,’ which is an intellectual achievement. Just imagine academics who are nowadays evaluated and funded based on indicators such as the number of publications and citations—at the end of their career. If their academic epitaph consists only of a list of publications and citations (the longer, the better...), saying nothing about what they have actually discovered, solved, or contributed to their field, then the intellectual core of their academic life has been emptied and, even worse, falsely obscured by statistics. If the academic world is to have any future, it must renew its intellectual core and develop further on this basis.

Thank you for an inspiring interview. I believe that it has contributed to a much-needed discussion on the problems of our academic environment and that it will also prompt those responsible for this area to reflect.

Profit maximization leads to the manipulation of media, education and research

Peter Dinuš

Jan Klán: The production and distribution of knowledge was integrated into the industrial system of mass production and capitalist private enterprise. Within an increasingly transnationalised network of corporations, knowledge has become a productive force and a market commodity. Since when has this shift occurred and why? Does this spill over into universities in Slovakia?

Peter Dinuš: Yes, it does. Science in a capitalist society is shaped by the demands of market forces in the interests of private capital. In former post-1989 Czechoslovakia, science became a servant of the market. Higher education and academic institutions were integrated into the context of mass capitalist production within the market economy. Adaptation of the nature of Slovak universities, colleges and academic institutions in recent decades, i.e. the transformation of this environment into one that favours performance with the corresponding work accomplishment reports, is closely related to the deepening of the market nature of the capitalist economy through widespread commodification, which finds its ideological reflection in neoliberalism. Through such a lens, not only Slovak colleges, universities and academic institutions are viewed in the same way as private companies. No distinction is made between material and intellectual production. Knowledge as a commodity is quantified, measured, traded and monetised on the market at a profit. Such is the case in Slovakia, the Czech Republic,

Hungary, Poland and other countries where capital controls the way the country is run.

However, such approach is not surprising. This perspective has co-determined decisions about public support for science in the U.S. and Western Europe since at least World War II. After 1989, we jumped on the bandwagon, too. The criticism of the commercialisation and bureaucratisation of higher education and academia, with its performance and audit culture, which finally took hold in our country after 2000, is all the more topical and justified.

I am convinced that of all the methodological tools for understanding social processes in the global context of transnational capitalism, Marxism still remains the best one. With this in mind, the bourgeoisie makes various attempts to neutralise it, rightly seeing in it a recipe for the elimination of its class ownership and power.

Do you think that many private universities and fields of study, regardless of our expectations of their graduates in terms of their contribution to society, have a distorting effect?

Private universities are generally oriented towards profit maximization rather than towards raising the education level. Fields of study are opened for the sake of attracting the highest possible number of students, regardless of the societal demand for specific qualifications or employment opportunities. Then there is a goal to retain students at all costs, which is often achieved by lowering an imaginary benchmark in a student's performance evaluation so that underachieving students were not forced to leave school. There is thus a kind of 'race to the bottom', where the popularity of a school is mainly based on the ease, least amount of work required and speed of obtaining a given degree. This is also facilitated by the university funding system, which has long favoured high enrolment numbers at the expense of the quality of education. The consequence is the inflation of

university degrees, especially in certain areas. In addition, there is a strong preference for fields of study that do not require high investment in the operation and delivery of studies. As a result, the more investment-intensive technical fields remain almost entirely in the charge of the state.

Even assuming the existence of high-quality private universities, their existence is in principle an undemocratic element as it introduces a factor of income and socioeconomic status into the availability of quality education, where parental wealth, rather than students' talent or aptitude, determines who gets an education and a degree.

Does this imply that there is a distortion of education in that the student is seen as a client, a consumer?

The distortions in education also show in 'populist' policies towards the student. The problem already starts with the constant lowering of admission standards, where there is a persistent and growing tendency to admit as many students as possible. This, coupled with unfavourable demographic developments, leads to the softening of entrance examination passing scores, even to the point of eliminating admission tests altogether.

In the course of the studies themselves, distortions in the teacher-student relationship are also having a very negative impact, with 'populist tendencies' emerging in order to increase the popularity of a given field of study and to maintain a high number of students, even at the cost of decreasing the demands on the student. Such tendencies are further enhanced by the forced evaluation of teachers by students, where the natural hierarchy is disrupted. The result is similar to court judges being evaluated by their 'clients' - the most popular teachers are more often than not those with the lowest demands.

Another problem in higher education is the disproportionate emphasis and prioritisation of research and publication criteria at the expense of teaching. Teaching then turns into a 'necessary evil'

or into a 'Cinderella'. It is carried out hastily alongside research and publishing activities, which are an existential sine qua non for university teachers (the 'publish or perish' dictum), and thus inevitably take priority. This is reinforced by the set-up of the remuneration system for university staff as well as by the redistribution of funds among the educational institutions themselves.

We live in a society where terms like disinformation and fake news are bandied about. We are a heavily overinformed society. People often cannot distinguish between what is true and what is not. Is it right to use the word *disinformation* and institute a crackdown on it? The Czech Republic has made amove to restrict 'disinformation' websites. What is the situation in Slovakia?

Similar to that in the Czech Republic. People's feelings and opinions about socio-political reality that deviate from what is written and proclaimed by the regime's media are monitored, controlled and censored on social networks. In Slovakia, too, some websites have been shut down. People are beginning to perceive that truth and information are solely in the hands of the ruling power, while critical, alternative, anti-government or anti-establishment positions and opinions are nothing but disinformation, fake news, conspiracies and hoaxes. Some people joke that all that the government lacks is a 'Ministry of Truth' or that the difference between conspiracy and truth is only a matter of weeks or months.

After the year 2000, the word began to carry its weight again; the regime no longer feels as strong as before. As a result, it is forced to monitor, control, discredit and sanction opinions and attitudes that are not in line with the hegemonic ideology of the ruling class. This is a proof that the contradictions of monopoly capitalism (imperialism) have recently become increasingly acute. The aggravated situation in the international arena is reflected at the local level, in individual nation states, by the

deepening ostracization of other than official attitudes and judgments. The campaign against extremism, disinformation, conspiracies, etc., ultimately shows that we do not live in any kind of universal freedom or democracy. The regime is afraid that this mask will be torn off, that it will lose its legitimacy, that the ideological status quo will be upset, which may lead to a realignment of forces in favour of the ideas of anti-capitalism, democracy, peace and real freedom.

The fact that, in recent years, the media have been subservient to political parties' demands is probably due to the interests of big business, which, as it can be argued, have become oligarchised. Is this also the reason why, for the profit's sake, they hunt for sensationalism and scandal rather than providing objective information?

The media express the interests of capital and its owners. They are mostly privately owned and serve the political and commercial interests of the ruling capitalist class and manipulation. Their oligarchizing has been taking place in the West since before the Second World War. They do not provide objective information. Yes, in their efforts to make as much profit as possible, they are tabloidized. They bring sensations, lawsuits, scandals, and gossip: "...there is plenty of gossip. You entertain the audience and inflame the politicians on both sides. That's the way it should be, right?" says Arnold Hackl in the TV detective series *Thirty Cases of Major Zeman*.

Criticism of overestimating the quantitative evaluation of research results features nowhere in mainstream media. These 'respectable' media promote commercially and bureaucratically distorted conception of science, education and their institutions, which, as a rule, ties in with the accreditations at universities and the Slovak Academy of Sciences. These only take into account the results of measuring and comparing the scientific performance of individual universities or institutes of the Academy of Sciences according to some quantifiable indicators, on the grounds of

which funds are then allocated or withdrawn. This is to be the main criterion of quality, rather than the contribution to individual disciplines through the production of a specific scientific work. I have come across a case where the director of one of the social science institutes of the Slovak Academy of Sciences demanded a correction from the SME newspaper after the newspaper published some false information and disparaging statements in this regard. However, he has never received a reply.

Social networks are a breeding ground for hate. They are often used by the opposition against whoever has just won the election. Sometimes, one may find rather disgusting comments there, whose authors are hidden in anonymity. Do social networks influence not only the outcome of elections but also the electoral culture itself?

Social networks have little bearing on the election results. The most decisive institutions for influencing the outcome of elections are voter preference polling agencies, whose results are widely publicised. They determine the approximate percentage of support for each political party, informing the public of the likely voter support for a designated political party. Voters then make their choices based on their foreknowledge of support for particular political parties. The winner is usually the one who receives the highest percentage of votes from these agencies.

On the other hand, social networks influence electoral culture. They have become a site for an ideological struggle between the supporters of two segments of the ruling capitalist class: the national bourgeoisie and the reactionary comprador bourgeoisie, which represents the interests of foreign capital. Their mutual rivalry has been quite fierce in Slovakia, ever since the time of Vladimir Mečiar's government. At the same time, the compradors identify themselves as 'decent' defenders of democracy and freedom, purposely blaming their political opponents for undermining democracy and democratic culture, of spreading so-called conspiracy theories, disinformation, hoaxes, hate speech,

bullying and extremism. Meanwhile, it is the regime media that in the fact spread conspiracy theories about the control of the European Union by 'neo-Marxists', of Slovakia by 'communists and secret agents', of Iraq's possession of chemical weapons, or of Robert Fico's government's links to the Italian mafia.

Social networks also serve as a platform for questioning or rejecting the rule of capital, attitudes which, naturally, do not feature in the official media. And this is a positive sign.

Neoliberalism became politically influential in the wake of the 1970s and the 1980s crises. The spread of policies associated with neoliberalism in the US, Britain and other Western countries was justified by their alleged effectiveness in dealing with crises and, above all, by their benefit to large business owners and high-income managers. The reality was that social inequalities began to widen even more rapidly. How does this affect the lives of ordinary people? Does this concept resonate in your country as well?

It does. Interestingly, following the collapse of socialism, the policy of neoliberalism was applied by the global financial oligarchy in Eastern European countries after the model of fascist Chile. Capital, with its neoliberal bourgeois policy, is dictating its terms not only to Slovakia, but also to other nation-states, without taking on any responsibilities aimed at the social advancement of the population, let alone social cohesion. Thus, a permanent characteristic of the present is the insecurity and failure to guarantee the quality and stability of working life, along with continuous pressure from the comprador Right to do away with the welfare state by privatising everything that can be privatised, from infrastructure to public services, which, for the general public, also implies paid health care and education. As the Slovak trade unions see it, the application of neoliberal policies in Slovakia has shown that efforts to increase competitiveness through social deregulation, reduction of workers' rights and of their protection are socially unacceptable and economically

ineffective. Opposition to the policy of neoliberalism is mostly expressed by the SMER-Social Democracy party, which is today the main political entity of the new ruling coalition of national bourgeoisie parties.

The current nature of capitalism controls knowledge creation more

Ernesto Dominguéz Lopéz

Jan Klán: There are various pitfalls and obstacles for left intellectuals who have to act in the current neoliberal and neoconservative system in many countries, the US and the EU in particular. How do you think the current deformed academic research is a reflection of a deformed, commercialized society there? To what extent the relationships of the individual to others in the public sphere increasingly correspond to the quality of their relationships in the private sphere?

Ernesto Dominguéz Lopéz: The nature of capitalism in its current stage implies an increased interest in controlling the production of knowledge, as it is the critical source of value and the structuring factor in the global political economy. This implies the growing participation of privately owned companies (from corporations to LLCs) in the funding of academic research and, by the same token, in the determination of research topics, lines and fields. Thus, in many ways, academic research is conditioned by the market value that its outputs may have, whether directly or indirectly. Riskier, more long-term fundamental research, work intended to verify previous results, and vast swaths of the social sciences and humanities lack economic incentive and tend to be underfunded. Some studies have shown the impact of private funding on university research, even in countries with strong public sectors, like Finland. Neoliberal views intended at reducing the role of the State in the management of society and the economy allow for this development, and largely encourage

it, as they also encourage evaluation systems focused on quantity and “marketable” prestige symbols rather than on quality and relevance of the research.

There is a second dimension here. The expansion of neoconservative ideas –under the label of neoconservatism I am encompassing a broad array of perspectives- have generated significant modifications in the social and political dynamics, which affect formal and informal institutions regulating social behaviour. These range from inter-individual interactions to policy and legislation, from social individual behaviour to control and surveillance. Academics exist within that framework; the administration of the academic work exists within that framework. Hence, professional relations, public interactions and private life are interlock within a broader, complex structure, currently dominated by neoconservative –and neoliberal- stances. The implication here is a system of dominant ideological biases that impose some level of censorship, whether intended or not. Left intellectuals are, almost by definition, excluded or marginalized in such context.

How is the neoliberal focus on profit being linked to the bureaucratic apparatus? One example is the administrative requirement to publish journal articles indexed in the Web of Science database, which is owned by an American private firm traded on the New York Stock Exchange which gets a lot of profit.

As commented above, the neoliberal perspective is pervasive in administrative structures that follow models of economic efficiency rather than more purpose-oriented indicators. There are several components that form a system of interdependent, mutually reinforcing parts. On the one hand, major databases and publishers are companies that seek profit. Yet, they are considered the standards of academic excellence and even set the metrics to measure the value of scientific work based on impact.

On the other hand, academic bureaucracy evaluates the results of academic work based on the total number of publications in the “right” journals, with the right metrics. Also, funding bodies follow these indicators to award grants and fund projects and to evaluate the work of research teams and academics. Additionally, a large part of the funds flows from companies and private non-profits, that operate within the same system and share criteria with publishers and databases. Hence, profit drives the behaviour of major factors within the system, thus conditioning the operation of the bureaucratic apparatus in multiple ways.

In the current system in the EU and the US, it is difficult for a talented, innovative and hard-working researcher who is an active and responsible participant in the university and academic system to get ahead. Young researchers and young university teachers are often underpaid financially and have only short-term contracts. How do you view this cognitariat?

Young researchers and teachers face very important barriers in their professional development, that begin with their undergraduate studies, or even before, depending on the specific country. In the US, for example, the high cost of a college education implies either a deterrent for many, or a potentially life-long burden for others. This undermines the full development of the intellectual potential of large swaths of each cohort. In other scenarios is less difficult this first tranche of their careers. However, once they enter the postgraduate and even postdoctoral academic life, often have to come by with small stipends or salaries, with very high levels of insecurity, while carrying a large part of the basic work –teaching and researching– under very high pressure.

The result is immediate: the partial or total loss of talent to more profitable and/or more secure jobs, or directly due to a young individual avoiding college, as it does not offer any safety. Furthermore, those who are in academia see their ability to produce knowledge curtailed by the time spent in applying for

funding or negotiating contracts, instead of doing their work. Not to mention the psychological harm this causes and its negative impact on their scientific production.

Where are academics supposed to secure a salary before they get a full-time job with a permanent contract (tenure)? Working in McDonald's and through short-term grants?

In the current context, the answer is: wherever they can. The system is warped in such a way that insecurity and limited income force young researchers to work part-time jobs and/or to hunt for short-term grants. This is an extremely flawed system, as it affects those young academics often during the more productive part of their careers, and definitively in the critical point of their development. It is, also, deeply unfair.

Furthermore, this situation entails a significant degree of inequality embedded in the very structure of the profession. Not differences derived from accumulated experience and merit, but deeply unequal terms only very tenuously related to actual talent, work-ethics and results. It also implies that those with enough familiar support, always a small subset of the academic world, are better positioned from the very beginning of their careers to reach permanent contracts and to build the necessary reputation.

From the point of view of your interpretation, if an academic somehow manages to finally get a tenure-track contract, has he or she then won? Especially because there is a lot of explicit or hidden censorship these years. Recently even presidents of two US prestigious universities were fired, for example.

This is a difficult question to answer, or to be more accurate, to answer in just one, straight forward way. On the one hand, an academic who achieves a tenured position won, if we consider her career path a competition with other aspirants and against relatively stacked negative odds, at least in many cases. On the

other hand, however, it is not definitive, or not necessarily definitive.

There is increased pressure on the academia that amounts to levels of censorship that contradict the acclaimed academic freedom, at least concerning some particularly polemic topics that are in the cross-hair of political forces and the elites. Also, there is criticism of the alleged unfairness of the tenure system, sometimes understood as a golden ticket that allows laziness. Consequently, tenured positions are becoming less secure, and positions in academic institutions are open to scrutiny, which in itself is not bad, but it can be used, and has been used for less than fair, socially beneficial purposes.

Is it difficult to point out and defend "wrongdoing" in the academic workplace? To publicly draw attention to the existence of bullying, i.e. to become a whistleblower. '

I have not experienced, nor witnessed this kind of situations. However, it is always difficult to be a whistleblower, particularly when working within a professional body with a level of esprit de corps. More importantly, however, as career success is highly dependent on evaluation by institutional authorities and support from bureaucratic structures, it seems to be a significant risk.

In university codes of ethics, hypocritical references are often made to morality and bad behaviour is condemned, but practice is often different. Where do you see the most problems?

The most problems that I have encounter include different forms of abuses of power, from punishing a student for any conflict with his or her supervisor, to appropriating the work of students and junior researchers -often on short-term contracts-without giving credit, to the development of "white bulls". The latter, much like the second, is connected to the quantitative-webometric system of evaluation used for competitive posts and funding, which operates in two ways: creating incentive for such

behaviour, and also deterring the affected parties from taking action. Also, these are often naturalized as normal ways in academia, which they are not and should never be.

Results are sometimes, even often times in social sciences, twisted to fit within a largely ideologically-based set of parameters. Deeply connected to this, publications are rejected and academics are not treated equally based on ideological biases, ethnicity and country or region of origin. This implies a mechanism of reproduction of existing dominant paradigms, rather a challenge and constant crossed examination that scientific work is supposed to be.

These types of behaviour have their correlates in teaching and the treatment of students. On the one hand, historical narratives and the models used in different social sciences and taught in class are largely Western-centric, and often have little room for any other perspective, not due to a proper consideration of merits, but rather due to prejudice or simple ignorance. Also, in some settings students are discouraged from engaging in discussions with professors, thus limiting their development.

Do you consider a journalist, state bureaucratic, grant-making, and academic mainstream politically opportunist?

There is a significant core of truth in this expression. Academic mainstream is a component of a much broader dominant episteme at any given time and social context. This means that scientific paradigms, ethics, forms of organization and operation, are driven by similar structural guardrails, thus creating a synergy. Additionally, as administrative and evaluation actors and structures are embedded in the overall power structure, they can act as conduits for political influence on the academia.

Public opinion, as largely produced by journalists and a variety of media is a legitimation factor both for academic work and academic discourse, and by the same token, a potential delegitimizing force. Grant-making is part of the academic world in

its current presentation, so it goes along and drives the mainstream.

But the key here is that all the structural factors are deeply intertwined with the power structure in any society. As such, the circulation of power and decision-making are key forces in the formation and operation of the consensus, through the formal mechanisms, but also through the usage of non-formalized, and even a-legal means.

Yet, there are some caveats, as synchrony is not necessarily perfect. There is room for decoupling, and thus contradiction. It can take the form of power struggles between different actors in the system, particularly when divergence stems from major political changes.

What to do then, is there a way out of this cage? How to improve the academic sphere and mass media in the West now?

The way out of this situation involves a complete revamping of the academic structures and its funding mechanisms. On the one hand, it would entail the exclusion of direct private funding and replacing it with public funding. There should be a distribution of resources that gives a basic level of support to all sectors and disciplines, that can be complemented with funds for specific projects, that should be allocated by decision-making bodies with high levels of transparency, based on democratic discussion and advice of external consultants with expertise but unrelated to the actors implicated. There should be an expansion of the system of tenure positions, that have a scale system for promotion but should not rely on fixed-termed contracts for most of the necessary workforce, thus increasing the levels of security and favouring the focus of time and energy in the production of knowledge. There should be efficient planning and a subsequent offer of entry positions for newly graduated and clear career paths available.

Regarding mass media, the path is fairly straight-forward: public mass media, with an emphasis on reliable information and in-depth analysis, and no adds or any other form of indirect control. This, as the prior ideas, demands important political decisions, including significant political changes that in turn would change the political economy of the academia and the media.

Intellectuals and intellectual production in today's era

Arne Kušej and Ivana Maričić

Jan Klán: What do you see as the pitfalls and obstacles for left intellectuals who have to survive and act in the current neoliberal and neoconservative system in many countries?

Arne Kušej and Ivana Maričić: When talking about the pitfalls and obstacles faced by leftist intellectuals, it's important to keep in mind some of Marx and Engels' early critiques of Hegel and young Hegelianism. The specific arguments made in these materialist critiques as well as the people and works addressed are not as important as their overarching point, which is that the social position of (left) intellectuals itself can be problematic, prone to idealistic illusions as well as individualistic, opportunistic and elitist tendencies, which are fostered by petit-bourgeois education and academic institutions. If the social position of (left) intellectuals within class society is not properly analyzed and critiqued, it's easy to succumb to these illusions and tendencies and to lose sight of what "intellectual labor" in its many forms is actually doing within a given social system. So the first and probably most fundamental pitfall for left intellectuals is insufficient reflexivity; the inability to properly reflect on one's own position within contemporary capitalism.

How do you think the current deformed research is a reflection of a deformed, commercialized society? Do the relationships of the individual to others in the public sphere increasingly correspond to the quality of their relationships in the private sphere?

To understand the social forces that govern research, we need to first understand that academics have their own specialized

forms of accumulation and competition, which cannot be reduced to the accumulation of economic capital. Both academic accumulation and competition are structured by what sociologist Pierre Bourdieu referred to as symbolic, social, and cultural capital: symbolic capital has accumulated academic prestige, social capital has accumulated academic contacts and partnerships, and cultural capital has accumulated knowledge, skills, and intellectual products. Still, if we accept that the academic field is embedded within the broader capitalist mode of production, it becomes evident that academic relations and market relations share certain rules of the social game – not only does academia encourage a sort of capitalistic “possessive individualism” in its own sphere, with entrepreneurial individuals competing for privileged positions and prestige, but it is also increasingly measured by standards of quantified “productivity” and even financial profitability that govern capitalism at large. This leads to a quantity-over-quality, publish-or-perish approach to research and writing, which often impedes rather than facilitates knowledge production.

How is the neoliberal focus on profit being linked to the bureaucratic apparatus? One example is the administrative requirement to publish journal articles indexed in the Web of Science database, which is owned by an American private firm that gets a lot of profit.

It’s strange to think that huge profits could come from something like the publication of journal articles, but the commodification and profitability of scientific publishing are well-established facts that directly tie into how research is funded and administered. The Web of Science database, which is used to measure the influence of papers through citation indexes – a metric that may impact the ability of researchers to receive funding, to attain positions at universities, and to publish in prestigious journals – is, indeed, owned by a publicly traded company, Clarivate. However, this is only one of the more recent

examples of companies profiting off scientific publishing. The older and more recognizable example is the publicly traded company RELX (formerly known as Reed Elsevier) which emerged as one of the great corporate monopolies in the scientific publishing business when it acquired the publishing behemoth Pergamont in the 1990s. In the 21st century, RELX isn't much more than the private owner of a particularly large database. It essentially sells scientific products (articles) back to the scientists who (collectively) produced them and charges exorbitant amounts of money for institutional access to scientific knowledge. Because of this, it has been the subject of widespread indignation both as a parasitic "rent-seeker" and as an enemy of "open science". An additional emphasis, however, needs to be placed on the role of companies such as RELX or Pergamont in the development of the sort of "publish or perish" approach to research and academic administration that emerged in the second half of the last century. Such companies not only directly profited from increased productivity in article production and the proliferation of (prestigious) scientific journals but also played an important part in (re-)shaping criteria for academic success. A detailed historical study of the changing relationship between the concrete expectations of profit-oriented publishers and the organization of scientific research would be needed to bring proper light to these issues.

In the current system, it is difficult for a talented, innovative and hard-working researcher who is an active and responsible participant in the university and academic system to get ahead. Researchers and university teachers are often underpaid financially and have only short-term contracts, especially those who are young and sometimes of the middle generation. How do you view this cognitariat?

There is a widespread romantic belief that meritocracy operates flawlessly within the academic realm. It does not. Research institutions are businesses like any other; each

department is typically represented by the head of the research group, who attends conferences and advocates for additional funding. Despite the constant nods to scientific progress, “innovative” research approaches – whatever that may mean – are seen as risky endeavors that could jeopardize the entire research group. Given these circumstances, it is often more prudent to maintain the status quo in research and focus on established and profitable fields rather than funding potentially disastrous projects. Ironically, the least compensated “intellectual workers” are often the most dedicated to study and research, as their superiors, occupied with lobbying for funds and conference presentations, have little or no time for actual research. However, as the lowest rung in the research hierarchy, (young) researchers are easily replaceable, given the surplus of candidates in the job market. This, combined with top-down pressure, fosters competition among peers and often leads to a hostile, even violent working environment – a sort of academic “war of all against all”.

If an academic somehow manages to finally get a tenure-track contract, has he or she then won?

While getting a tenure-track contract may make the academic’s mother very proud and may ensure financial stability, there is no winning in this regard, especially from a socialist perspective. At the risk of sounding old-fashioned, the focus – at least with regard to Marxist social research – should be on the role of science in (collective) class struggle, in integrating intellectual labor into struggles against capitalism outside the academic sphere, not on individuals attaining privileged academic positions. The petit bourgeois mind may rebel against this notion and insist that integration into academic institutions is imperative, but petit bourgeois tendencies should be rejected and opposed by socialists. While it’s difficult to divorce natural sciences from expensive academic projects, social research can – and perhaps in

today's climate should – strive to exist outside the boundaries of stable academic careers.

Would you consider this statement to be accurate? *Where the political government winds of the moment blow, there the state bureaucratic, grant-making and academic mainstream goes.*

Since governments tend to be one of the most important sources of funding for research (both in the natural sciences and the humanities and social sciences), this is indisputable, though trivially true: the academic mainstream will gravitate towards certain privileged topics and will tend to – in any case – present its own research in a way that is more likely to attract funding (that is, as useful, applicable or socially significant in this or that regard). However, it would be fascinating to study the opposite, less obvious tendency: how academics assert their own (sometimes quite inane) interests when applying for grants, how entire fields of research, schools of thought, or theories – even if useless or contrary to the “winds of the moment” – can be financially upheld merely by knowing how to navigate bureaucratic processes and how to market themselves properly.

Neoliberalism has affected India as much as the West

Kanchan Sarker

Daniel Vesely: Are there any neoliberal specifics of the Indian education process that differ from the neoliberal distortions in education in the West? Or can the familiar neoliberal dogmas in this area be considered universal?

Kanchan Sarker: I don't think they are any different, although the privatisation of public space in India started later than in the West. We can conclude that the school curriculum in India follows the American model. It is important to note that in the last 20 years, more than 70 percent of new public schools have been privatised. Tuition fees in universities are high, but in principle it can be said that India is not very different from the West in this respect.

Can you elaborate on why the neoliberal specifics of the Indian education process are not fundamentally different from the neoliberal distortions in education in the West?

On paper, higher education in India should be universally accessible, of good quality and should promote social values. However, in reality, its accessibility is diminishing. Enrolment in higher education is currently 29 percent. More than 66 percent of students apply to private institutions, and tuition fees are quite high for a country like India, as I have already mentioned. The widening gap between the enrolment in government and private universities can be traced mainly to the neoliberal period. But it is worth noting that the quality of private higher education in India is generally not good at all; this applies to a small number of private universities.

Is it possible to conclude that these neoliberal distortions affect all aspects of the public sphere? Or are there some Indian specifics?

The neoliberal distortions certainly affect all aspects of the public sphere. In India, for example, distortion of history is now very popular. It practically all started with the rise of the Modi government. The distortion of history is naturally linked to the distortion of facts, in line with the ideology of the extremist Modi government. Prime Minister Narendra Modi himself is a very skilled communicator and demagogue; in fact, he lies even more blatantly than Donald Trump. Modi wants to present to the world a greatly distorted Indian identity: he is telling the world that India is the mother of democracies, as if this were perhaps to his credit. But he is the gravedigger of Indian democracy.

Higher education in India fosters the spirit of secularism. But the Modi government is moving in the opposite direction. Is it only neoliberalism that threatens this pillar of higher education in India, or can other reasons be traced?

It is abundantly clear that Modi's neoliberal government has changed everything from primary education to higher education. Modi's government has virtually failed in every respect, except perhaps investment in infrastructure, especially transport. In order to win elections, the Modi Government has to rely on the Hindu vote, so there is a marked departure from secularism. Meanwhile, Modi and co. are trying to privatise all public goods. However, his strategy of consolidating the Hindu electorate by appealing to their identity and rights is not directly related to neoliberal practices, but merely complementary. We must remember that 80 percent of the population in India is Hindu, so the present government must have this key voter base on its side.

The current global dynamics are moving towards a multipolar world. India is a leading member of BRICS. Do you think this trend will lead to the weakening of institutions like the WTO and the desired shift of education and research away from commodification and commercialisation?

I don't think BRICS is a very influential organisation at the moment. Although India is a member, at the moment the Modi government is more inclined towards the policies of the United States. Things are also complicated by the historically problematic relationship between the Indian and Pakistani governments. Interestingly, both sides have long needed each other from a propaganda point of view to consolidate their own power on domestic soil. Pakistan, however, is not a very powerful country at present. So the Modi government needs another enemy, real or not. Again, we are talking about a strategy of populist promises to win the general election. Also, relations between India and China are not ideal, they are simply complicated. Given the complicated relations between China and India today, I do not believe that BRICS can replace the WTO, at least in the near future.

If the educational process was de facto a state or nation issue before the advent of the neoliberal era, was there not a danger then that education so conceived would be subject to, for example, harmful national myths?

I would like to point out that the neoliberal era did not begin with the Modi government; it had already begun several decades earlier. Indeed, as elsewhere in the world. National mythology began to decline in India precisely with the advent of neoliberal governments. However, national myths are most neglected now under Narendra Modi.

In India, there are significant differences in student-to-population ratios across regions and provinces, as well as differences between agricultural and urban areas, and between men and women, social groups, or the poor and the rich. This is contrary to one of the goals of higher education in India - equity. Can this gap be effectively bridged? If so, in what way?

No, it is not possible. The gap is entirely implicit. As I said, more than 70 percent of Indian institutions have been privatised. There are huge fees in education. There are a significant number of poor

people and members of the poorest castes, for example, students from the tribal community who want to go to school. So there is no dispute that there is a gap between those who can afford education and those who cannot. Not only is this gap widening, the standard of education is also declining. This does not mean that most private universities are better than public universities, some of which are very famous. However, quality education is out of reach for more and more non-wealthy Indians. There is an authoritarian atmosphere in the university environment: in the past year, two renowned professors have had to resign over criticism of the Modi government. So these incidents also occur in the 'largest democracy' in the world.

In the current political situation in India, can the glaring disparities in access to higher education be overcome, even as India becomes a key country in an emerging multipolar world?

I do not believe that this can happen. However, one positive thing that can be highlighted is the fact that more women are applying to higher education than before. Women now make up about 40 per cent of students at these schools. But this positive aspect of the Indian educational process is being undermined by the caste system. And, I repeat, access to quality education is also undermined by the financialisation of public goods. And unfortunately, this cannot be effectively countered at present. On the contrary, I fear that the dynamics are moving towards even greater financialisation and privatisation in the education sector, where outrageous fees will be levied and the gap between the haves and have-nots will be much deeper than it is now

Thank you for the interview.

Why are African experience and knowledge being ignored?

Albert Kasanda

Daniel Veselý: Why are African experience and knowledge being ignored? You made many analyses of these issues.

Albert Kasanda: I would like first to say something about the context of the book, *Towards a New Research Era*, and in doing so, to put the light on the singularity of my own contribution. This book is a critical and forward-looking reflection on research in the humanities and the social sciences, and by extension in other related areas. The contributions brought together in this book highlight two things: on the one hand, they point out the distortions characterizing the research activities and policy; and, on the other, they suggest a new horizon for research as, for example, regarding new themes; the philosophical and political frameworks within which research can be carried out efficiently.

We are living in the era of the triumph of neo-liberalism. This ideology conveys a set of contradictions opposing, for example, freedom of research to censorship, the development of the market to social and human fulfillment, individual profit to the well-being of all, consumerism to ecological deregulation, technological progress, or artificial intelligence (AI) to humanness. This divergence deeply affects the research development of both qualitative and quantitative points of view. While it is acknowledged that the drastic reduction of budget frustrates the development of research, it should also be noted that, to a certain extent, censorship represents the risk of emasculating researchers themselves. The fine introduction to this book, written by Emil Visnovsky and Marek Hrubec, sums up in an obvious way this risk. It also points to a new horizon for a

research framework that encourages the creativity of researchers by eliminating the evoked obstacles.

The book is divided into three sections: the theoretical and practical foundations of research; research and education in Central and Western Europe; and research and education in the non-Western world. This division of the book represents a way to introduce a complex issue connecting multiple contexts. The worry for the new research context which would be inclusive, open-minded, and well-funded constitutes the link between papers examined in the book.

My own contribution is part of the section devoted to research in the non-Western world. It is entitled as follows: *The Marginalization of non-Western Epistemologies*. I can say this contribution is at the right place, as it calls attention to a context of research that is hardly considered and valued. Many people stand on prejudices and stereotypes inherited from thinkers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and from both slavery and colonization's contexts, to consider the non-Western world, particularly Africa, as uncivilised. As Achille Mbembe depicted it in his celebrated work, *Critique of Black Reason*, Africa is viewed as characterized by deficit. It is a world of deficiencies and a lack of aesthetics, knowledge, economics, humanness, and scientific spirit. Standing on V.Y. Mudimbe, I can sum up this perception of the non-Western world in terms of a colonial library. The idea of a colonial library refers neither to any building nor any physical space. This expression is an abstraction referring to an immense body of texts and system of representations that have over centuries invented and still invent Africa as a paradigm of difference and alterity.

The struggle against the COVID-19 pandemic served as a showcase to denounce certain malfunctions in the research and knowledge production sphere. As concerning the non-Western world and particularly Africa, this analysis points to the neglect of other forms of knowledge and human experience in the fight

against the COVID-19 pandemic crises, in favour of the Western canon alone. This analysis goes beyond the COVID-19 pandemic context to address the monocultural way research is carried out, as the plurality of ways of thinking and knowledge production characterizing humankind are ignored.

African thinkers including Paulin Hountondji, Achille Mbembe, and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, to mention but a few constantly deplored this state of research regarding Africa. It is worth mentioning thinkers from the global South perspective as, for example, Boaventura de Sousa Santos with his concept of ecology of knowledge.

Could you explain the reasons why African and global South epistemologies are marginalized?

Knowledge produced in Africa as well as in the Global South in general is often viewed as showing a deficit. Regardless of its relevance, this kind of knowledge is described as second-rate. African and global South researchers are treated with condescension by their Western colleagues and research institutions. Such an attitude does not raise ex-nihilo. It has deep historical and ideological roots.

First, it is worth reminding the founding credo of modernity, embodied by thinkers such as René Descartes in *Le Discours de la méthode* (1637), and Francis Bacon in the *Novum organum* (1620), which imposed reason as the only valid mode of production of knowledge and access to. Standing on such a principle, any other form of knowledge production was recognized out of this paradigm. Subsequently, African epistemologies also were disqualified since they were considered as not relying on the reason. In addition to that, the racist discourses developed around the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries including subsequent pseudo-scientific theories hierarchising human beings also contributed to the neglect of African epistemologies and non-Western knowledge.

At some point, I can speak of the racism of the Enlightenment as reason was used to justify a range of racist prejudices and the development of theories proclaiming the inferiority of certain categories of human beings. The French thinker, Marquis de Gobineau, is one of the most representative figures of this current of thought. Colonisation, particularly through the so-called civilizing mission, also contributed to marginalizing non-Western modes of knowledge production.

As I already evoked, many African and Africanist scholars have been calling for the recognition and rehabilitation of African epistemologies. This was the case concerning thinkers such as Cheik Anta Diop, Ngugi wa Thion'go, Paulin Hountondji and Achille Mbembe, to mention but a few. These voices are scattered, and African political leadership is still cautious on this subject. The lack of autonomy, and above all the lack of substantial funding also constitutes a real handicap in this respect.

There are both strengths and weaknesses of universalist anti-COVID-19 measures. Could you tell me your interpretation of these problems?

In the panic following the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic, everyone and every country tried to protect themselves as best they could with the resources available. Meanwhile, researchers in epidemiology and related disciplines worked hard to identify the virus and find effective ways of stopping the pandemic.

In fact. Measures taken by the world health authority, and the world leading powers aimed at this same purpose. However, it should be noted that the living conditions of people are not identical. Something that can be beneficial in the North Pole, such as clothing appropriate to deep cold, does not have the same relevance for people living in hot countries. So, the idea of imposing the same measures on everyone regardless of his specific context and life conditions turns into a form of

essentialisation, ignorance, or neglect of differences. And this is our critique of the global health leadership.

To struggle against the COVID-19 pandemic, Africa received a small quantity of vaccines compared to Europe and the United States, for example. Despite initial catastrophic forecasts based on the want of efficient medical infrastructures, this continent is one of the regions of the world that resisted better to the pandemic. This paradoxical experience allows to balance measures and treatment recommended by the World Health leadership. While appreciating the contribution of modern science to stopping the pandemic at a global level, it is important to keep in mind not only the difference concerning life conditions but also the possibility of other forms of knowledge. Not all Africans got vaccinated against the COVID-19 pandemic, but many of them relied on indigenous medical treatment to face the crisis. Despite being mocked and accused of irrationality, these remedies, which are not approved by the World Health Authority, helped many people to survive the crisis. Madagascar is an illuminating case.

What anti-COVID-19 measures related to the African context have been proposed by African researchers?

Obviously, the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic caused widespread panic in the world. As Arundhati Roy pointed out, nobody knew how to behave or whom to trust anymore. Everyone was suspicious of everyone else. We all became a kind of sorcerer's apprentice.

In the wake of this, African governments followed the recommendations set out by the World Health Organization (WHO), including lockdown, wearing masks, keeping a safe distance and hygiene. While the measure concerning hygiene has been successful, the others were hardly applicable since they were not appropriate to local and day-to-day realities. On the contrary, people relied on their traditional medical practices and codes, which must be more developed and diffused. Researchers in

philosophy and social sciences put emphasis on the preservation of social link and cultural legacy, since for them the struggle against the COVID-19 pandemic -like all kinds of disease- is not only a medical issue, but it also involves culture as well as social and political structures.

What are the lessons learned by Western researchers from the African experience of struggling COVID-19 pandemic?

I think the fight against any pandemic whatsoever cannot be viewed as a solitary act, exclusive to the concerned human being's group. Such a struggle should be an act of human beings' solidarity in defence of life and based on sharing knowledge and experience. This should work in both ways. Africa has experienced numerous epidemic crises throughout its history. This continent has received quite a lot of support from the Western world regarding the identification of virus or their causes of epidemy, as well as concerning modern and appropriate treatment. The same applies to the West and other regions all around the world. The essential thing is to unite the forces that are conducive to human life over and above our differences. I am afraid it is still too early to say what exactly Western researchers learned from the African struggle against the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly in the current context of asymmetrical power relations between the Western world and the Global South, including all the prejudices I already evoked. If something can be pointed out from this experience, for the time being, I can mention resilience as the mindset of African communities to trust in their future and to struggle for life despite poverty, and want of appropriate infrastructures and technology.

What has been the difference in perception of the anti-COVID-19 vaccine movement in the West and Africa?

First, I must recognize that the vaccine is a revolutionary medical process in the struggle against various epidemics. As such, it is based on the principle of preventing evil with evil, by

inoculating the disease-causing agent into a healthy body to boost immunity.

Despite the progress that has been made, this principle remained a source of multiple and burning debates. Let us make a long story short. In the eighteenth century, for example, the reluctance to this medical innovation was based on moral thinking that inoculation was an even greater evil, and it was wrong to want to cure evil with evil. The religious discourse denounced man's presumption to try, through manipulation, to usurp the place of the only master of life, God. For protagonists of this way of thinking, nature should be allowed to evolve according to God's will. Another fringe of anti-vaccination critics insists on the free choice of individuals and therefore challenges the authority of the State in this respect. Some also denounce the pharmaceutical business lurking behind the all-out promotion of anti-COVID-19 vaccination.

Africa has not always been reluctant to vaccination, even if its experience in this area has been patchy. The campaign against polio, for example, is one of the oldest on the continent, and it did not incite great waves of opposition as is the case concerning the COVID-19 pandemic campaign. Mistrust of the COVID-19 vaccine is something very particular. It takes up some of the arguments of Western anti-vaccination protagonists, while at the same time widening its scope by evoking, for example, conspiracy theories articulated around two main and inter-related purposes: this vaccine is presented as an initiative of the world ruling powers to control African demographics. Through these vaccines, it will be possible to exterminate or at least reduce drastically African population. The aim of this operation would be an appropriation of African land and its invaluable resources. On the other side, the anti-COVID-19 pandemic vaccine is viewed as a springboard for the global pharmaceutical industry's business. These institutions are suspected of seeking to increase

their own stock markets by imposing unnecessary products on governments worldwide.

Finally, a large part of activists and movements of civil society consider the anti-COVID-19 vaccine campaign as an expression of Western hegemony and control over African governments. The fact that the latter are imposing without any discrimination measures from elsewhere on their people is seen as an attack on their sovereignty. Some Western scientists openly claimed their desire to rely on the African population to experiment with the anti-COVID-19 vaccine, just because of African want of medical infrastructures. This intention, considering African people as guinea pigs and ignoring their personal consent, aroused critical thinking and fuelled resistance to this vaccine more than ever.

Could you make a more general conclusion?

In the end, I would conclude by stressing research and knowledge production in both the Western world and the Global South. The challenges remain the same everywhere, despite the diversity of contexts. These include the censorship that subtly curtails freedom of research; the reduction in funding for research; predominance of the Western research paradigm to the detriment of other epistemologies and forms of knowledge, to remind but a few. Going beyond this observation, we have to open new perspectives calling for the establishment of what, following Boaventura de Sousa Santos, I can call an ecology of knowledge.

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Manipulated Research and Media Interviews on Neoliberal and Neoconservative Distortions

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