

Essay by Prof. Włodzimierz Zawadzki

Science Here and There

Science is one and the same everywhere, but it is practiced differently from place to place. In Poland, scientific careers follow a certain hierarchy, after the German/Austrian model. One first attains a doctorate (PhD), then a higher doctorate ("habilitation"), then the title of associate professor, and lastly full professor. That hierarchy has worked well in difficult times, protecting against ruling officials' designs to take charge, and the title of professor still commands considerable respect. Climbing up the successive rungs in this academic ladder served as a source of motivation, also a measure of one's effort and achievements. I am writing about this partly in the past tense, because once democracy came to prevail, something started to go amiss.

Prior to 1989, the Polish research community was very sensitive to any attempts to violate its "inalienable rights," as they were then called. A clear case of this came in 1968, when a set of PhD-holders were promoted by the central authorities to the rank of "docent" (senior lecturer), despite not having completed their habilitation, as was formally required for such a post. This greatly outraged the research community and was discussed for long years as an example of an unheard-of attempt to meddle in higher education and science. But in the wake of the political transition, the Polish research community fell into a kind of slumber, and has not woken up to this very day. The democratic officials, on the other hand, have not been sleeping. The general trend is towards flattening the hierarchy. First the differences began to be blurred between the associate and full professors (nominated by the country's president), and universities gained the ability to give their employees professorships as well. In recent years, the ruling officials tried to eliminate the habilitation degree, a cornerstone of the existing career model. The community felt that was going too far, and put up a certain resistance. The attempt ended in a reform that crippled the procedure, eliminating the colloquium and habilitation lecture, leaving reviewers no opportunity to ask the degree-seeker questions. It all takes place on paper, mechanically, "sight unseen." I sometimes take part in such procedures myself, out of duty but without pleasure.

One argument that gets cited in the media in support of getting rid of the habilitation is that the United States has very high-caliber science, yet there is no such degree there. The argument makes no sense because conditions are completely different in America, where everything, including science, is governed by the market. If someone holding a doctorate produces good publications, he will be offered a professorship and a higher salary at a better

university, and from one day to the next he will move to the other side of the continent. This mechanism operates on every level, and there is a well-known case of a Nobel laureate from Harvard who moved to a university in Texas because he got a better offer. Researchers' salaries are negotiable in America, and one professor may earn significantly more than another at the very same university. If someone receives an offer of employment for his wife at another center, he will tell his current boss: "They are giving me this and this, and will also hire my wife. Match that or I'm out of here." The market. The funding making such things possible generally comes from private sources, the best-paid professorships get named after their sponsors, and the most famous universities live off of financial investments and national grants, not from budgetary subsidies.

In Poland, a scientist works all his life in the same place, earning according to the pay-scale for the post he holds. One can be an outstanding or lackluster researcher - everyone in the same position earns the same. Not much depends on where one works, either; only the Universities in Warsaw and Kraków are ranked higher than others. Good centers do not attract outstanding scientists because they are unable to offer anything special. Things are similar in France, but in Germany and Austria there is greater mobility of scientific staff - scientists are not allowed to become a professor at the same place where they earned their habilitation degree. Competitions for professorships at a well-known university in Germany can attract up to 100 candidates!

Close relations with foreign researchers are very beneficial for scientific life in Poland. We do not talk about it much today, but in 1956 we were the first country in the communist bloc to start sending scientists abroad. When I told my colleagues from Russia, Czechoslovakia, and East Germany that in 1965 I had received a grant from the Polish Academy of Sciences to spend a half-year in the United States, they could not believe it. It is the foreign research world that recognizes and rewards the achievements of our scientists nowadays, performing functions that the sluggish Polish system does not. That is possible in fields where English rules, mainly the natural sciences. The Internet and email have recently accelerated that process greatly. That is natural, because we throw our results into the same worldwide pot. As I already mentioned, science is one and the same everywhere. ■



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