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Idea of Civil Disobedience**

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CEZARY KOŚCIELNIAK

## UNIVERSITY, STUDENT ACTIVISM AND THE IDEA OF CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE

### I

At the turn of the second decade of XXI century student protests across Europe gained new momentum. Their direct, although not the only, cause was an increasingly restrictive financial policy adopted in the higher education sector which had a direct impact on students. Protests are also initiated in reaction to other issues and „meritocratic” protests are not rare, e.g. in Germany, where students protested against the oversimplification of curricula, low education quality, crowded lecture halls, etc. Protests take various forms and they may be of symbolic character, as it was in Florence, Italy, where students took over the Brunelleschi's dome, or in Rome, where students organised a massive, day long demonstration which resembled the alter-globalist protests during G8 summits.

History of protests in XX and XXI century has often seen tragic endings, suffice it to recall the White Rose movement, members of which were associated with the University of Munich, or developments on Tienanmen Square, a site of cruel repression of those involved in the protests. In Poland, past decades were a heyday of student activism reaching its pinnacle in 1968 and 1989 when the protests against the communist regime were followed by brutal response of those in power. For the whole generation of activist involved in student contestation, experience gathered during those years provided a firm background for their future political careers: after the turn, they emerged as the key players of Polish public life. After 1989, however, university protests lost momentum and students merged with the transforming society focusing primarily on building its way to prosperity. The most recent protest took place in 2011 in Cracow, its participants opposed restrictions imposed on tuition-free studies, but the form and generated impact could by no means be compared with similar developments abroad<sup>1</sup>. It is worth noting that protests take place not only in Europe or United States, but also in Africa or Arab world. We have relatively little data on similar events in Russia and China, although even in those countries one may record student activity which is

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<sup>1</sup> Amendment to Higher Education Act from 2011 imposed additional criteria on students willing to start additionally a second course.

not servilistic towards the regime<sup>2</sup>. Thus, it may be of note to mention that the protests, or „student activism” to use a more precise phrase introduced by Philip Altbach, is a worldwide phenomenon and it is therefore impossible to regard it – as is the common belief – as antics of spoiled youth or see in it only anti-totalitarian activity. Entering the second decade of XXI century, student activism is preoccupied with redefinition of higher education policy as well as the world of politics itself. Scholar faces one more problem here: the very phenomenon of activism is far from homogenous, not all protests share common trait which renders it impossible to present them in a simple comparative study. Crisis-stricken second decade of XXI century provides the setting for the current surge in political activity of the Western students: politicians are forced to return to neoliberal financial regimes and introduce such drastic changes as disbanding departments or even closing down entire universities. Student protests seem therefore a natural implication of such changes.

The author seeks not to analyse the individual protests (this was undertaken by other authors contributing to this volume), but rather focuses on the phenomenon of student activism as such, its cultural aspects and how does it relate to transformations of public life. Recent years brought an upsurge in student activism which begs the question: what are its sources, meaning and current cultural character? Is student activism just a channeling of youthful energy against the old order that must be redefined? Does it have anything to do with the fact that from early on young people are introduced to the idea of civil society which triggers protests of students who feel they have no political representation? Can student activism be understood as a strive for realisation of such significant social values, as labour market accessibility and demand for modernised and well organised state? Or is it implicitly advocating against social exclusion? And, whether the student activism, in the face of precarious financial situation of European universities, is not becoming a firmly established institution of the European university which is assigned a cultural task of critical approach toward implementation political agenda? Certainly something is at stake here, protesting students not only demand to maintain the *status quo* of their universities and position of the academic community, but they regard changes as an assault of politicians on their future, as additional obstacles and obligations limiting their personal development. Cutbacks within the university are treated as an attack on equal access both to education and labour market. Cuts in spending on universities and students creates the impression that the state refuses to facilitate the equal start. The ideology

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<sup>2</sup> For instance, students of Moscow universities printed at the turn of 2011 an anti-government calendar in protest against policy adopted by the authorities.

of equality that emerged in the wake of the protests of the sixties is being currently dismantled. At the outset, it may be useful to note that the current student protests in Europe are seen through the prism of the predominantly Western activism of the sixties. Indeed, at that times university protests were closely related to emerging of a new model of state which completely reshaped both the society and structure of the university<sup>3</sup>. Whereas the protests of the sixties had an emancipatory and political character, present activism focuses rather on higher education policy and confronts the relations between students – university – welfare participation. The idea of egalitarianism fell short of expectations, trend to cut education funding couples with growing problems for young European graduates to find their place on the labour market. Egalitarianism, however, is an important value in European way of dealing with social issues and the citizens of the Old Continent require their states and its agencies - this includes the university - to apply the principles of equality. Ever since the equality, understood as the access to institutions of knowledge, has been granted in the majority of EU countries, egalitarian demands advanced further and has been covering particularly access to institutions that ensure welfare. The research reveals, however, that it will be increasingly difficult to meet such demands in the future. A comprehensive take on the issue is presented in an inspiring *Oxford Handbook of Welfare State* (2010).

In presentation of the phenomenon of student activism one should not focus his attention entirely on 68', student disputes are as old as the university itself and were always tempestuous and scandalous, a far cry from the staid and reserved image of a scholar. Let us stress one more thing: protests reveal involvement of the university which transcends its historical role restricted to research and teaching assigned to it by Wilhelm von Humboldt. Now, the university undertakes the so called „third mission” consisting in fostering regional and economical development as well as establishing itself as a cultural institution. University

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<sup>3</sup> Student protests in the West during the sixties are thoroughly analysed in the literature, see Martin Klimke, comparing protests in Germany and USA, *The Other Alliance: Student Protest in West Germany and the United States in the Global Sixties*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010, Richard P. McCormick, revealing the phenomenon of black student movement, *The Black Student Protest Movement at Rutgers*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1990. Th. Nick „Challenging Myths of the 1960s: The Case of Student Protest in Britain”, analyses student protests in the 60' in UK. Raymond Boudon (1977) „The French University since 1968”, a comparative study describing social changes in France in the wake of 1968. Philip Altbach (2006) uses comparative method to characterise student protests of the 60 in industrialised and third world. Polish perspective, see *Uniwersytet zaangażowany*, pub. Krytyka Polityczna 2010, presenting contexts of domestic 1968 focusing mainly on University of Warsaw.

becomes a „society-wide” institution tackling topics of politics, religion and art or participating in broadly understood culture of innovative technologies. Indeed, protests show that the university has claimed (or, for that matter, reclaimed) a power of persuasion, it is not merely a stakeholder producing knowledge and kudos as an element of economical system, but holds also authority that immensely affects public life. Such authority possesses power of its own and has its own means of persuasion, all this attracts young critical people interested in social philosophy.

Should politicians be afraid of the university? If the answer is yes, there are plenty of reasons why. In the USA, student protests forced president Johnson to abort his policy on the war in Vietnam and protests in South Korea in 1987 contributed to transition toward democracy. History delivers plenty of similar examples, and as for the future, it seems that in the era of global communication critical function of the university may be further strengthened. It follows that exercising control over the quality of democratic process by the institutions of knowledge is not plain fiction or wishful thinking.

Brief description presented above reveals that the student activism in the Western world has a strong links with democratic institutions. This link is clearly manifested in protests against certain practices taking place in the domain of public life. Student activism in its core may be interpreted as a form of disobedience, although it purports not so much to deconstruct the political system, as to initiate protest in the areas where society is dysfunctional by identifying its shortcomings and the need for new arrangements. In order to reach a better understanding of this phenomenon, we shall refer in subsequent part of the text to the idea of civil disobedience advocated by Hannah Arendt. This will reveal that protest seeks to improve the democratic institutions. Another aim of the article is to provide the definition of political activism and present its recent manifestations by sketching a comparison of Western experiences with Polish March of 1968. Finally, closing section of the article comprises an attempt to interpret the institution of protest within the context of task of modernisation assigned to the university. One way to analyse the specific case is to apply to it a theoretical framework thus putting it in a broader interpretive perspective (see Pascal Vennesson 2010). Method used in cultural studies will be another point of reference. It will reveal values behind the student activism by introduction of normative perspective (see Michael Keating 2010).

## II

Political involvement and radical student protests, resultant riots, political bouts, more or less serious events and disputes finding occasionally tragic ending are as ancient as the university itself. While embarking on the analysis of this phenomenon, it is difficult not to mention, even briefly, historical roots of student activism. While describing social background of the universities at their dawn, Harold Perkin, a historian of higher education (2007), remarks that social structure of academia characterised by such multiplicity of social classes is in itself a composition prone to cause conflicts. Each group comprising the stakeholders of the university strived for expanding its autonomy and influence on other groups. The medieval university was an institution of great tensions between the lecturers, students, local ecclesiastic hierarchy, municipal authorities and the citizens. The latter group often was at loggerheads with the students which would lead to regular street-fighting and casualties were not uncommon. Social structure of medieval university varied depending on the country, but in any case was highly diverse. For instance, scholars and students on the University of Paris were associated in guilds: „Gildia profesorów istniała od 1170 roku, formalny status uzyskała w 1210, skupiała się na ograniczeniu kontroli kanclerza katedralnego, który miał prawo do nadawania licencji dla wykładowców” (Perkin 2007, p. 163). Students were organised in groups representing their national interests: „Francuską (z Ile de France), Normalską, Pikardyjską, i Angielską (zawierającą także Niemców i inne grupy północnej Europy)” (p. 164). Such groups were governed by bodies which were responsible, among others, for relations with Parisians. Italian universities had a different structure and local students exercised much greater influence by, e.g. participation in the governance of the university. Author summarises this in short: „Paryż stawał się <<uniwersytetem mistrzów>>, natomiast Italia <<uniwersytetem studentów>>” (p. 164). Because the student's rule triggered conflicts with professors or citizens, students were constantly struggling for recognition of their rights. According to Perkin, student riots and protests occurred on regular basis: „Tylko w 1245, po wielu miejskich zamieszkach i migracjach, studenci poddali się prawu cywilnemu miast oraz uzyskali przywileje zaakceptowane przez wspólnoty i papieżstwo” (s. 165). British historian stresses that such harsh disputes led to founding of new universities, masters and students were leaving hostile cities and settled elsewhere. Such was the situation in France, Italy and England:

„Podobnie jak w Paryżu i północnych uniwersytetach, także i Bolonia miała problem z miejskim ludem. Kłótnie i walki doprowadziły do migracji uczonych do modeny i Montpellier w 1170, Vincency w 1204, Arezzo w 1217, Padwy 1222, co dawało możliwość założenia uniwersytetów w tych miastach” (p. 165).

Perkin notes that tradition of student protest in those countries is particularly strong (p. 165) and dates as far back as Middle Ages. This mechanism of protest causing migration and founding of new universities was present also in other parts of Europe, such were the beginnings of Cambridge: „Początki Cambridge sięgają migracji z Oxfordu po miejskich zamieszkach w 1209 roku” (p. 165). Disputes and political bouts engaging both students and professors were a common occurrence even at the renowned universities. Results of such events often proved to be turning points of their history.

In the Renaissance era, university witnessed religious strife of the Reformation. This caused conflicts and establishment of new academic communities. One of interesting examples of Central Europe was German-dominated Charles University of Prague, which in XV century was a scene of religious quagmire. To quote Perkin: „Niestety Czesi i Niemcy popadli w konflikt zaostrowany przez XV wieczne religijne i filozoficzne dysputy pomiędzy zwolennikami bohemskiego reformatora i realistę Jana Husa, a bardziej ortodoksyjnymi Niemcami, będącymi zwolennikami nominalizmu. Podczas gdy król Czech Wenceslas IV próbował narzucić czeską hegemonię na uniwersytet w 1409 roku, w wyniku czego Niemcy oddzielili się i odeszli do Heidelbergu, Kolonii, Lipska” (p. 167). In effect, national and religious upheaval in Prague caused migration of scholars and contributed to growth of other communities which are widely recognised till this day.

History of conflicts does not end here, they occur also during the age of Catholic Counter-reformation or anti-religious Enlightenment and led to founding of institutions of knowledge completely independent from religious institutions. It seems, however, that the modern-era dispute concerning the form of governance of the university is not only linked with political activism, but, as it was discussed by Immanuel Kant in his *Contest of Faculties*, stems from a dispute having at its core the status of knowledge which in turn influences the structure of academia. Modern changes within the institution of knowledge emerged in the wake of new scientific discoveries and establishment in modern-age France of such new institutions for

further progress of knowledge as academies of science or scientific societies (see Drozdowicz 1983). Ideological upheaval begins with developing of modern models of the university, e.g. model of new Catholic university proposed by John Henry Newman where the mission of scholar is intertwined with preponderant role of theology which effected in adopting a critical approach toward a model which is neutral in this respect (see Jędraszewski 2008)<sup>4</sup>. The Newmanian university is therefore a concept that matured in the course of conflict with British academic culture.

Contemporary division into research and teaching universities also sparks controversy. In his book *God, Philosophy, University* Alasdair MacIntyre reiterates the roots of the university and criticises such division as inconsistent with more general and holistic end that the university is supposed to pursue. Similar arguments, though presented from a different ideological perspective, are recalled by Christopher Newfield in a book *Unmaking Public University*. He places contemporary university against the background of cultural conflict expressed by the introduction of the procedures for knowledge management and university management. Although these authors describe American landscape, their findings may well apply within the context of western Europe.

This brief description of the chosen historical academic conflicts shows that the phenomenon of protest is an ingrained feature of academic culture that was later taken over by the civic culture of democratic systems. Students struggled for their rights as well as influence and control over universities. Further, history shows that the universities were involved in public affairs, scholars not only produced knowledge but from the dawn of the university were engaged in ideological and social activity and did not eschew religious strife. Neutrality is therefore a fairly new trait of the university and student activism became a solid element of democratic cultures. It may thus be worthy to pose a question: how would we position student activism in a philosophical and political context?

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<sup>4</sup> Dispute concerning the role of religion in modern world begins with opposing ideas of Newman and Humboldt. The role of religion in the university of the present day is currently widely discussed, particularly in USA. It is worth to mention here books analysing this issue - D. Jacobsen, (ed.), *The American University in Postsecular Age* (2008), C. J. Sommerville (2006), *The Decline of Secular University*, and *Religious Ideas for Secular Universities* (2009).

### III

Contemporary form of student activism requires a precise definition. An explanation provided by Philip Altbach may prove useful: he notes that regardless of political or ideological involvement as well as country or historical context, student protest is essentially a contestation.

„Generalnie aktywizm studencki ma naturę opozycji. Ta opozycja wobec istniejącego autorytetu może pochodzić z lewicy bądź prawicy, albo może być wyrazem samej formy kultury bądź religii” (Altbach 2006, p. 148). Author remarks that the contemporary protests tackle national, global, economical or religious issues (the latter pertains particularly to Islamic countries). If we would like to follow the train of thought of the American scholar, we would possibly state that what all protests share is their adversative character or, to employ a philosophical term, disobedience against the established social order. Disobedience is not necessarily manifested in revolutionary activity or hatred towards the state, but is rather characterised by a publicly expressed protest against the form of government, constitution of the university, public practices or deep regional or global changes<sup>5</sup>.

We would like to view student activism as one of critical elements supporting democratic systems. Adversative character of political involvement of the students may be analysed in a broader context of democratic instruments and it happens that institutionalised form of disobedience is one of such instruments. Also Zygmunt Bauman (Bauman 1995) stresses importance of control over public activity and subjecting political moves to close inspection. Indeed, universities may control implementation of social or political agenda in an informal and non-oppressive manner. This may be achieved by holding public debates or using expert knowledge of scholars who in this way contribute to public life.

In order to present the student activism as a special case of civil disobedience sanctioned by the social order, author of this article offers to enrich the interpretation of this phenomenon by adducing to the concept presented by Hannah Arendt in her essay „Civil Disobedience”

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<sup>5</sup> Student activism is initiated both when changes occur on global scale and when they have more regional impact. Example for this are protests in Sub-saharian Africa at the turn of the 90, see J. Nkiyangi „Students Protests in Subsaharian Africa” (1991).

(Arendt 1999). This point of reference will allow for placing student activism within the framework of democratic institutions.

Providing institutionalised framework for student protests is important because the authorities and part of the society regard such activity as having negative or even anti-state character. Such was the case of Polish March 1968 when the regime denounced the protesters by promoting the slogan „students back to books” thus denying them the political subjectivity. Disobedient citizen is not necessarily a disloyal citizen. An act of disobedience is a last resort when there is no other way to cause change or amend the political system. Hannah Arendt provides the following description of its origin:

„Nieposłuszeństwo obywatelskie pojawia się wówczas, gdy znacząca liczba obywateli dochodzi do przekonania, że normalne kanały dokonywania zmian nie funkcjonują, a skargi nie zostaną wysłuchane lub uwzględnione, albo przeciwnie, że rząd chce dokonać zmian i zabrał się do tego, upierając się przy sposobach działania, których legalność i konstytucyjność stoją pod wielkim znakiem zapytania” (p. 177).

In this sense civil disobedience must be public, it is a morally justified action which in the end of the day serves the ends of the state. Arendt compares those who demonstrate civil disobedience with criminals abusing the law and shows that the latter group, apart from the clear difference of intent, does not act publicly nor reveals its purposes. Finally, „człowiek demonstrujący nieposłuszeństwo obywatelskie, choć zazwyczaj różni się w zapatrywaniach od większości, działa w imię i na rzecz grupy” (p. 171). A criminal counts on quick gain arising from the wrongdoing. Disobedient citizen, although bears in mind also his own interest, expresses the goals championed by the group, is convinced of rightness of his ends. Protesting students who resort to violence (as it happened during demonstrations in Rome in December 2010) or occupy the building (as it was in the case of Glasgow, where occupation was deemed illegal and ended with the fights with the police) are not „criminals of specific kind” but „disobedient citizens” who openly manifest their concern with changes that affect at least one social group. It is the conscience, argues Arendt, that is the philosophical abode of human protest. Precisely there one first senses anxiety concerning the good and the evil. Conscience, however, continues Arendt, is only capable of shaping private opinions which are individual in their character and as such have no required momentum. Only when common will they be sanctioned by the group and have the required force: „A siła opinii nie zależy od

sumienia lecz od liczebności tych, którzy ją wyznają” (p. 161). This remark describes how university protests unfold: they are triggered by many individual opinions of dissent. Diversity of issues taken up by the protesters, political or related to the university itself, indicates that the mission of the university is public in its character and mature civic attitude of the students generates the „multiplied force of individual opinion”. Finally, Hannah Arendt indicates that civil disobedience is related to the fact that social changes occur rapidly and reaction of critical citizens is becoming an increasingly important instrument of modern democracies which permit dissent. Thus, the author argues that „znalezienie konstytucyjnej niszy dla nieposłuszeństwa obywatelskiego byłoby wydarzeniem o wielkim znaczeniu” (p. 181). Democratic system must develop means to express social dissent: „Zgoda i prawo do wyrażania niezgody stały się inicjującymi i organizującymi zasadami działania, które uczyły mieszkańców tego kontynentu „sztuki stowarzyszania się”, z czego wyrosły dobrowolne zrzeszenia” (p. 194).

It is forty years since these words have been written and the case of post-communist Europe provides us with ample example of dissent which paved the way for foundation of civil society – student activism is one of the most efficient means to achieve this end. The instrument of civil disobedience may gain further authorisation when politicians are denied legitimate representation by the groups opposing the political decisions - such was the case with higher education reforms, e.g in Italy, which spurred massive and violent protests against politicians. It seems that Arendt's concept should be strengthened by identification of institution permitting disobedience. The university is precisely an institution of such sort: on the one hand it is supposed to serve the community, on the other hand it releases its potential of critical thinking, allows for in-depth examination of social matters and sympathises (although not unconditionally) with the protesting students. There is one more cultural reason causing the protests: links of egalitarianism with doctrine of „knowledge society”. Currently, Europe struggles with high unemployment among university graduates. Demand for securing material prosperity proves increasingly difficult to satisfy and this translates into disappointment and frustration. University, understood as an institution implementing economical policy of the state, will experience increasing difficulties in fulfilling this social task of linking knowledge with access to material security. Future looks grim: the ongoing crisis that may last for years to come seems to undermine this link and need may arise for it to be revised.

Student activism chimes with critical approach of the university and the task of promotion of pro-democratic attitudes, polyphony of opinions and freedom of speech, freedom of association or public demonstration of one's convictions. Today, the university is expected to be proactive in support of civil society and education<sup>6</sup>. The university, sensitive to social „soft issues”, ceases to be an institution regarding the world from a distance but engages in civic activities - those activities include dissent. Student activism and protests may be therefore regarded as an element of the institution of „civil disobedience” which promotes not only the ends of the specific group but those of the society at large. Throughout the last forty years, student protests have defended freedom, expressed anti-war sentiments (e.g. in Poland under communist regime or in USA entangled in Vietnam conflict), raised social issues (e.g. France 1968) or concerned the university itself (2009 meritocratic protests in Germany 2009). Other background involved budgetary cuts which consequentially suppressed implementation of egalitarian policy (e.g. UK, Italy and Portugal in 2010 and 2011). It is natural for student activism to take on academic and political issues, in this way it contributes to public debate and tackles key problems of public life.

#### IV

Next, I would like to characterise student activism. Who are the contesting students and who do they represent?

In a chapter „Students Political Activism” of his book *Comparative Higher Education* (2006), Philip Altbach answers the question “who are the protesting students?” by applying his „time sectional” method consisting in putting student activism in perspective of various events of the past forty years. Also Arthur Levine and Keith R. Wilson (1979) analyse the protesters by describing transformations of student activism in the United States in the course of the seventies<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> University involvement in public affairs is contested, Kazimierz Twardowski in his lecture „O dostojęństwie uniwersytetu” [„On the dignity of the university”] stresses that it is the distance to the world that makes it a permanent institution. See Twardowski (2008)

<sup>7</sup> I overlook here possible methodological problems that may arise due to the great diversity of cases and broad temporal perspective adopted by Altbach. The goal of the author was to show a comparative perspective by presentation of cases of student activism in various countries. In turn, Levin and Wilson limit their field of research to cases of student activism in USA in the seventies which results in a more precise description which, however, is limited in its scope.

When characterising students involved in the political movements, Philip Altbach remarks that it is the students of social sciences who most actively engage in such activity. Author offers the following explanation: „Przedstawiciele nauk społecznych mają tendencję do bardziej radykalnych poglądów niż generalnie inni akademicy i to krytyczne spojrzenie może rzutować na studentów” (Altbach 2006, p. 155). At the same time, various political views of the involved students are represented more or less equally.

This would be supported by Levine and Wilson who compared students involvement of 1969–1970 and 1977–1978 by examining their support of various political organisations. Study revealed that at that time „Young Democrats” had the biggest number of followers. Within 1969-1970, their number amounted to 44%, in years 1977-1978 it reached 30%. The number of students supporting a right wing organisation amounted to 43% and 28%, respectively. Further, „leftist political groups” had within both periods 9% and 8% percent of followers, whereas „rightist political groups” scored 10% and 4%, respectively. It follows that only within 1969-1970 followers of right wing movements exceeded the number of left wing supporters by 1%<sup>8</sup>. The presented data pertain to the United States. If we would like to compare them with student organisations in Poland under communist regime, the largest group of this kind was Independent Students' Association (Polish name: Niezależne Zrzeszenie Studentów – NZS), a rightist organisation opposing the marxist-oriented authorities.

While describing the background of student activists, Altbach indicates that their parents were well-educated and affluent. Also leaders of those movements descended from well-educated families. Author also cites findings of the research which revealed that the activists of the 60' were determined to achieve the best academic results. It is remarkable that the leaders frequently belonged to minorities, which often are of religious character: „W Japonii i Korei mała populacja chrześcijan wydała nieproporcjonalną liczbę liderów wśród studentów. We Francji protestanci byli nieproporcjonalnie bardziej zaangażowani. W Stanach Zjednoczonych, studenci pochodzenia żydowskiego, jak i liberalni protestanci byli znacząco aktywni” (p. 156).

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<sup>8</sup> In 1969-1970, authors list one more organisation called *Students for Democratic Society* which were supported by 16%, of the students. This movement, however, is not described as clearly rightist or clearly leftist.

This phenomenon is believed to be explained by social consciousness of the minorities and their involvement in such social movements as emancipatory groups. Examination of religious roots of the leaders of student activism is certainly thought provoking. Although no quantitative research has been conducted to investigate this issue in Poland, Dominican and Jesuit student ministries located in large academic communities remain very active. These organisations attract committed and involved students and many representatives of this environment held public offices or were successful in business. It seems, however, that Polish Catholic universities and religion in general are of minor importance to the phenomenon of student activism. After the fall of communism, Catholic universities, although formerly regarded as the leading advocates of freedom (particularly Catholic University of Lublin), failed to take leading role in redefining Polish higher education policy or setting new standards for student activism.

If one tries to compare the foregoing with situation in communist Poland, it becomes clear that student opposition had a similar pattern. On the one hand it was an opposition professing laic ideas (it played a major part in March 1968), on the other hand there were people with close links to the Church. Another major player during the eighties was already mentioned Independent Students' Association, which, despite of its rightist leaning, was never entirely Church-oriented. Altbach stresses that majority of American students comes from well-to-do and educated families. But Polish universities had a more egalitarian social structure, under the communist regime candidates were awarded additional points for their working class background which translated into the fact that student leaders came from the families with varied economical status.

Answer to the question “who are the protesters?” supplies us with identification of the subject of protest, its motives and means used to promote the cause. If we take a close look at the protests of 2010 and 2011, we discover that methods used by the protesters change with the development of new media and new information technologies. Today, student activity streams through such Internet tools as Facebook or Twitter. Access to the social networks allows for following protests online. In a sense, this creates a kind of “oral history” of protests. Since they are broadcasted live, it gives them the emotional dimension strengthening the message they are trying to convey. Furthermore, we are given a chance for more active on-line participation. All these innovations contribute to a cultural change. In effect, minister Gelmini is probably equally unpopular among students and professors from Italy, Poland, UK or

Portugal. Both global changes in higher education policies, caused by adopting similar systemic solutions across the world, and emergence of global communication channels contribute to the fact that student movements are more powerful, their voice is more resonant and their aims, at least in Europe, are similar<sup>9</sup>.

## V

In final part of this text I examine social and cultural implications of student activism. Politics has always been the first reason for engaging in such activity, both in developed countries and in the third world. Philip Altbach lists the following reasons for student activism: „wojna nuklearna, prawa i wolności obywatelskie oraz wojna w Wietnamie były głównymi motywami amerykańskich protestów studenckich w latach 60” (p. 157). In similar fashion, continues Altbach, students in France opposed de Gaulle and German students protested against the ruling christian democrats. Brutally quelled protests in Sub-saharian Africa in the 80' were not only an expression of discontent with the economical situation but also opposed the unfavorable education policy (see Nkinyangi 1991). African protests meet with aggressive and brutal response of the authorities and usually end in bloodshed. This is not to say that using force against the students happens only in Africa. Altbach provides examples of other developing countries that used force in confrontation with the students: „W Urugwaju, Birmie, i innych krajach studencki aktywizm spotkał się z masowymi militarnymi represjami” (p. 161). Certainly information concerning student activism in those countries reaches the international community which usually in such situations remains passive and disengaged but sometimes is in position to use certain instruments of international policy to apply pressure on the oppressors.

Obviously, Western students are eager to organise protests because it is a useful tool for achieving their ends and its participants are not politically stigmatised. Altbach shows that direct effects of student protests cause cultural change, introduce new values professed by the liberal middle-class and lead to radical revision of curricula. It is precisely protests in Europe and United States that led to establishing such new courses and research fields as women studies, ethnic studies or broadly conceived culture studies.

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<sup>9</sup> One may recall common anti-crisis policy manifested by extensive budget cuts in Italy, Great Britain and Portugal that took place in similar time, which in effect caused similar reaction of student in those countries.

Polish experience of student protest boasts a long tradition, it is, however, complicated and marked by the struggle for independence. It is epitomised by secret education courses organised during the World War II; if discovered, participants of such courses were punished by death<sup>10</sup>. In the last forty years, however, university protests were related to political changes and the students chose radical forms of protests. Comparison of the protesting students in Poland and those in France seems illegitimate. Mikołaj Lewicki (1998) recounts an anecdote describing a Polish screening of the documentary presenting French protests which nails down the differences in goals pursued by students on both sides of iron curtain:

„We see shots on the barricades, cars in flames, suddenly appears a group of students and with joyful smiles and lavish gesticulation push a brand new Renault to Seine. The audience lets out a groan of terror, someone cries <<God, what a bunch of idiots...>> Car – a luxury object of desire practically unavailable for <<poor Poles of 68>> is unanimously sunk in Seine. [...] Footage from Paris is to us nothing but absurd” (p. 236).

Unlike in the West, Polish students were severely repressed. Lewicki notes that comparison of such protests is a risky enterprise:

„[...] If one analyses May events in Nanterre [...], any attempt to compare, find analogies or similarities with the Polish March seems futile. [...] Comparison of student, or youth, opposition in specific countries and drawing any final conclusions aiming at revealing common „spirit” of 1968, which like spectre would haunt the world, is paradoxical in the same extent as comparison of the activity of United States in Vietnam with Stalinist terror and let me remind that such comparison was not uncommon among the protesting students of Sorbonne” (p. 237).

Ideas harboured by supporters of both communism and capitalism as well as the way Western students pictured real socialism were naive and unrealistic. It was only with utmost difficulty that the repressive character and economical malfunction of the system penetrated to their minds.

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<sup>10</sup> Higher education initiatives during the period of annexation were discussed at length by Antoni Michnik (2010).

Despite obvious differences, it may be of note to ask: was there a link between the experiences of the West and the East? Certainly, such common trait may be found in the fact that participants of the protests were aware of their impact on politics. This was a major asset of this generation and even today fuels parties situated on the left of the political scene. Michał Sutowski (2010) offers the the following account of Polish experiences in this respect: „Walks of life of the protesters had various bends and twists: the plight of defiant protesters was emigration, prison or political career in a party, conformism or involvement, extreme anticommunism, liberal pragmatism or renouncing of the politics. [...] Student protests shaped several generations, and even if it were not „generations of Poles”, these were at least generations of „symbolic elites” (p. 127).

While describing moral and cultural consequences of Polish March, Ireneusz Krzemiński (1998) points at the deinstitutionalisation of morality and transition to subjectivity. This process was a generational change in perception of relation linking individual and institution. „[...] March 68 was, among others, a protest against institutionalised morality represented at that time by the party. Moreover, this experience convinces that „morality” is a spontaneous social domain and its norms are subject to lively or even impulsive interpretation” (p. 262). Polish March created an entirely new and informal role of Polish university, namely preserving the art of critical approach and safeguarding freedom and democratic character of the society. „The concept of <<March generation>> assumes emerging of two phenomena at once: first, creating of what I call „new awareness” which included certain moral values, and, even if shaped in a more general and brief fashion, a project of <<righteous society>>. Secondly, it involved forming [...] of social bond creating the <<generation>>. (p. 271).

Here, we can discover some similarities between Poland and the West. Students engaged in contestation where prominent figures of their generation. Presidential term of Bill Clinton and liberal political projects of his administration were political symbols of then matured generation of protest. In Poland, the generation in question came to power after the fall of communism in 1989. In its political dimension, it had a clear leftist character. But also traditional institutions, particularly the Church and opposition that formed after August 1980, had their share in overthrowing of communism in Poland. Therefore, it seems justified to argue that student activism initially prevailed thanks to its solid anti-totalitarian frame which later assumed political character. Ireneusz Krzemiński proposes not to speak about „protest” but „contestation”, meaning new, socially and morally lasting changes that took place in

Poland during the post-war period: „The word <<contestation>> [...] is more fitting than <<protest>> or <<opposition>> because it carries the meaning of those words while at the same time allowing to speak of broader and lasting pattern of behaviour, of a strong tendency to present certain significant attitude in various social situations. To <<contest>> is to refuse to accept, to be against, to demonstrate protest and dissent in one's everyday life. This referred not only to the party or state, but to attitude commonly manifested by the majority of the society” (p. 271).

Student activism was also a response to constraints imposed on intellectual life. There were attempts to rekindle it by revival of the idea of the Flying University or Society for Educational Courses. Such institutions were established during the period of annexation and their endeavors were focused on preserving Polish culture. Spontaneous need for establishment of such institutions exposed such tasks of the university as production of knowledge and its social relevance.

By referring here to concept of civil disobedience presented by Hannah Arendt, it may be said that it is a prerequisite of contestation. Both civil disobedience and contestation of young generation are elements of social dynamics shaping long-term political and cultural changes. If so, one must stress at this point the importance of university, this hatchery of protest and contestation. If Arendt advocates the need to institutionalise disobedience, it would be crucial to add that the society will not be capable of forging such institution without the university, its public tasks and the above-mentioned critical approach. It is therefore crucial to secure the autonomy of the university and safeguard public consent to its involvement, since this testifies to its freedom and maturity as well as the freedom and maturity of the society itself. As for stable welfare democracies, it would be detrimental if the university was perceived only as economic player and catalyst of future careers of its graduates. Research presented by Altbach shows that core of the protest is located in departments of social sciences and humanities which indicates that precisely these parts of the university form the scene of *theatrum publicum*, the agora. To employ the language of Socrates, the university is a midwife of important social values. This becomes clear if contrasted with non-democratic countries, where force used against the students reflects the condition of the society at large; it is then a dysfunctional society where violence replaces dialoging communities. University which admits contestation of public life achieves status of an institution defending human rights. Krzemiński describes the new awareness of the March generation as the right for public

criticism: „Right of an individual to criticise publicly those in power, whoever they are, became a universal law of the new awareness. This was so because it meant a dislike and mistrust toward any institutionalised authority, i.e. those having at their disposal (often informal) machinery of repression used against dissent or questioning of the views or moral principles preached by the authority” (p. 273).

The experience of March and the above quote testify to the need for the university furnished with an institution of civil disobedience. If we seek today a moral formula for the modern university and ask how to fit it in the democratic process, the answer is: we need a university that secures knowledge, liberty and freedom of discussion with all benefits deriving from public privileges, including civil disobedience.

After 1989 student activism lost momentum both in Poland and in other post-communist countries, although the reason for it is not betrayal of the idea of critical thinking. It is rather secured space of freedom where students can openly express their opinions and may freely involve in politics or advocate for ideas. Moreover, Polish university is currently redefining its identity covering now many fields: it engages in building of welfare state, but also takes an ideological position towards its ends. Final pages of the history of student activism can be devoted to the restructuring of the university in the direction of innovation and growth of wealth. It should not be understood purely in terms of university management, but as a social project shaping state policy and social goals of the new generation of students. Accessibility and links with the market cannot be avoided, although they may stand in contrast with accepted and traditional obligations and features of the university. This tension is expressed in a book *Transformacje uniwersytetu* [*Transformations of the university*] written by Marek Kwiek. In this sense, involvement is channeled in different direction, once it was political, today it is focused on economy and development:

„University is today very much perceived in terms of economical competitiveness of nations and regions as well as global pressure on national economies [...] it is arguably the first time in history when functioning of universities is of such importance both for economy and large masses of graduates (also without precedence) ” (Kwiek 2010, p. 183).

This redefinition of the mission of the university strongly influences student activism which in a stable democracy with emerging economy is no longer interested in involvement in public

affairs and is rather a tool for expressing student interests. Is it justified to call this situation an ideological crisis? To limit one's interest in social affairs to circulation of capital is surely a sign of spiritual and intellectual decay. But it may also be a sign that Polish democratic institutions are efficient enough and it is not necessary to protest against them. Balance between the market, democracy and development is difficult to sustain in the long term. Cuts in Italy and Great Britain which sparked student protests testify to this observation. However, a remark supplied by Marek Kwiek seems crucial here: it is impossible to view university outside the competitive context, where competitiveness is understood not only in its economical, but also symbolic aspect. But that's another story taking us beyond the topic of student activism.

## VI

In conclusion, it may be of use to restate that the current, primarily European, protests create tension: states facing unyielding crisis find it increasingly difficult to meet egalitarian expectations related to access to wealth or promote socially ingrained idea of meritocratic „knowledge society”. Neoliberal changes and cuts affecting soft regions of social life (this includes universities) also contribute to this situation. Student activism is certainly an integral part of the democratic system, or, more specifically, of what Hanna Arendt called „civil disobedience”. Its significance in the Western world is undeniable. The question remains, however, to which extent will the increasingly dark economical future of developed countries prevent the materialisation of the demands of the protesters.

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