The University Leaves the Ivory Tower. A Discussion about the Commercialization of Scientific Research in Poland.

Summary of the doctoral thesis

The thesis directs attention to the public debate on the commercialization of scientific research in Poland.

Nowadays one can observe arising concerns about what the role of universities, especially public ones, in the process of commercialization of the results of scientific efforts. The need for changes in the whole higher education system is seen as one of the main challenges for policy makers. It refers both to the teaching programs as well as to the research conducted by the academics. Therefore, with that in mind, achieving the best possible compromise between a traditional university mission and the expectations of the financing institutions seems to be one of the main challenges.

Since most European universities are public, the Polish discussion reflects many concerns of the West European discussions. Three main dimensions of this discussion can be distinguished: commercialization of knowledge in the broad sense, commercialization of the universities as institutions and commercialization of the results of the scientific research.

As the discussion about the goals of the universities seems to be as old as the university itself, in the first part of the thesis the historical context has been developed. I evoked two famous views of the idea of the university. One was set out by John Henry Newman and another one by Wilhelm von Humboldt. In the next step I try to examine selected ideas which seem to be predominant in the discussion in twentieth century. This provides the basis for an analysis of the contemporary international discussion about the idea of the university in following part. It shows how the variety of social and political forces beyond the academia influence the discourse about the university and to some extent even control it. Thus, important changes in the recognition of the academic autonomy have occurred. To map this discussion the author employed the Foucauldian notions of knowledge – power and governmentality. This reveals that the policy makers and international think thanks have become active and important actors in the public discourse. Apparently, the academic community is a subject of more and more
top-down regulations, especially in European countries, also in Poland. The question of the vision of the development of the universities arises. Following that, the ability of academic community for taking the role of an agent of change in order to shape this process is another issue. Applying the Agent Network Theory by Bruno Latour has helped to highlight the problem of the network connections between science, business and politics. Following Latour one can give many historical evidences of how those three corporate actors can spontaneously and successfully create a “seamless web” of cooperation.

In order to map the discussion in Poland a set of almost 600 articles from newspapers and internet sites and well as some visual materials on the commercialization of research were gathered, although the newspapers articles (397 items) where the main subject of the analysis. This empirical material covers the period between January 2014 and June 2015. During this time, a vital discussion on the novelty of the higher education act took place in Poland. Some strategic documents and pieces of legislation regarding that fact are also included to the analysis.

In that context, controversies around the two competitive projects of the strategy of development of the higher education system should be mentioned: one commissioned by the Ministry of Higher Education and another one which was prepared by the experts from the most influential academic organizations in Poland. Although the discussion took place before 2014, I decided to include this into the analysis. This case study reflects not only the discussion about the two competitive views, but also - if not mainly - the communication problems between the policy makers and academic society. To explore this issue, the author employed some insights from the theory of communicative action by Jurgen Habermas, especially the concept of validity claims.

The thesis ends with the conclusion that the public discussion on the commercialization of scientific knowledge in Poland reflects acute differences in the definition of applicability of university knowledge between academia and other actors of the public discourse, especially policy makers and entrepreneurs. While the policy documents operate on the basis of notions of technology transfer and development of labor recourses many academics refuse to accept this point of view because it undepreciated the role of humanities.

The analysis leads us to the another conclusion that businessman and academics still operate in the different discourse circles (or following George Herbert Mead and Jurgen Habermas - different discourse universes) with only few commonly recognized areas of mutual
understanding. One of those is a conviction that the universities are the most important producers of knowledge in the modern world. However, there are some voices challenging that conviction and underling the role of private research organizations. However, it is worth mentioning, that all actors of the discussion declare to find the ways to overcome any barriers in the way to consensus. Nonetheless, the mode of doing that is closer to the more traditional goal - oriented strategies rather than actions based upon communicative rationality.