

PLAGIARISM AND POLITICAL LIFE: BARGAINING THE NEW FORMS OF “DISTINCTION”

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Abstract

After the fall of the communist regime and following the general opening towards the Western world and its values, Romania saw a proliferation of universities: 56 state subventioned universities (8 of which were military) and 26 private universities. Recently, the process of evaluation led to the accreditation of 189 doctoral schools, representing 398 scientific fields. At the same time, in recent years, numerous journalistic investigations, some confirmed by decisions of academic forums, have brought to light an unexpectedly large number of political, administrative and military leaders who obtained their doctorate through plagiarized works. However, all these journalistic investigations and the debates generated by them have led to a simplistic explanation: politicians are corrupt.

Under these circumstances we have to reveal the mechanisms that allowed the distortion of the academic model of integrity and the maintenances of the structures and procedures that allow, even encourage the fraudulent obtaining of university degrees. Based on Bourdieu's work on academic fields and the battle for cultural capital, in our study we will show how the political actors used the breaches in the law, rules and organizational

systems, or created such breaches, in order to a) transform political capital into cultural capital; b) promote into power positions (full professors, deans, heads of departments) those representatives of the university environment that would enhance their ability to obtain the academic titles and enhance their reputation, – which will then be re-transformed into political capital. The political instrumentalization of plagiarism was favored by factors such as the pluri-valence of plagiarism definitions in the Romanian legislation, the passivity of academic bodies of quality assurance, the absence of indisputable moral and professional courts, such as "watchdogs" against such excesses and abuses. In this context, the media and some NGOs were more active than the universities, which, through numerous revelations, raised public awareness. Paradoxically, there was no immediate and firm reaction from the university courts. Beyond pathetic and too often politicized statements, university leaders have not given clear signals that they are determined to deal with this phenomenon – in fact, the broadest institutional reaction has come, unexpectedly, from the National Intelligence Academy (the university of the secret services of Romania) which sent for

analysis almost 20 theses that it considers affected by the “suspicion of plagiarism.”

We will show that when we talk about obtaining Ph.Ds. through plagiarism, we must understand that it is a system – that is, the **institutionalization of theft**, a group of people who although they intended to prevent this phenomenon, tolerate, encourage, and promote it as normality. Ultimately, the system was shaped by the interests of its actors: aiming at meeting their own personal needs, they distorted the principles of academic research on the one hand, and the mechanisms of selection and of academic control, on the other hand. In this way, two contradictory processes interconnect: a formal adaptation to the western curricula and a deformation of these general frames by the academic and extra-academic actors.

New elites always need a symbolic legitimization – some are building churches, others are financing sports clubs, others are investing in cultural industries etc. The academic title (PhD + the status of Professor) offer a form of “distinction” (in the meaning of Pierre Bourdieu’s concept). Political leaders thus turn political capital into cultural capital – by simultaneously distorting the academic system rules, inserting savage capitalism norms (=unregulated markets). On the other side, in these 30 years of post-communist history, the main concern for some academic elites was transforming the top positions from the

academic hierarchy in means for obtaining financial and/or political benefits. In this way the doctoral school leaders (supported by their rectors), used their decision-making powers to create a “market” of doctoral titles (that they would control and that would generate economic benefits). In this case, the academic leaders have exploited their position as providers of public respectability and have negotiated the politicians’ access to academic titles in exchange for different economic benefits and political protection.

Journalistic investigations have done a great job by revealing the plagiarised fragments of all these doctoral theses. The debates, generated by intellectual elites, have pointed at the corruption of the political class, as a label, but without conceptual developments. As far as I know, there is no integrative theoretical model that could explain these phenomena and predict its further evolutions. In my analysis, based on Bourdieu’s work on academic field and *the conversion of economic, social & cultural capital* (Bourdieu, 2012), I have attempted to provide a theoretical model to explain the phenomenon of “top” plagiarism, as a systemic process. Starting from the model of capital liquidity and its transformation from one category to another (political/social, economic, cultural) and from the strategic needs of different actors to obtain control over their fields, we can explain its patterns and its redundant aspect (see the German, French, Czech or Slovakian cases).

References

Bourdieu, Pierre. (2012). *Distinction: a social critique of the judgement of taste*. London: Routledge