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## Ukrainian Higher Education as a Peripheral Laboratory of Neoliberal Transformation: an Ontology of Blandness vs/and Epistemology of Blindness

**Relevance.** This article provides a philosophical and sociological analysis of the transformation of the Ukrainian higher education system, which the authors view as a “peripheral laboratory” of global neoliberal reforms. **The purpose** of this article is to carry out a philosophical and sociological analysis of Ukrainian higher education as a “peripheral laboratory” in order to reveal the ontological essence of its transformation and the epistemological limitations of its understanding. **Methods.** Using a world-systems approach, the authors argue that the weakening of traditional institutions in the Ukrainian context has allowed the logic of the market, managerialism, and commodification to materialize in its most radical, “ideal-typical” form. This, according to article, makes Ukraine not a case of backwardness, but rather a leading model of crisis, revealing the possible future of the university on a global scale. **Novelty.** The article argues that the ontological essence of the crisis lies in the substitution of the essence of education (*Bildung*) for the production of simulacra. This process is revealed through the metaphor of educational “European-style renovation” – the imposition of new managerial surfaces on the old foundation without genuine transformation. Drawing on J. Baudrillard’s theory, the authors demonstrate how key elements of the system – diplomas, metrics, accreditation reports – become simulacra, signs divorced from the referents of real knowledge and competence, circulating in a self-sufficient hyperreality. Hyperreality is analyzed as

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a reality generated by models, no longer connected to any original, where the map precedes the territory. **Conclusion.** At the epistemological level, the authors identify a systemic trap: the very language of description and critique of education is occupied by managerial discourse (“service”, “KPI”, “stakeholder”, “efficiency”). This makes it virtually impossible to formulate alternatives in categories that go beyond the neoliberal paradigm. The conclusion argues that studying the Ukrainian case is a central task for global critical theory, as this “laboratory” reveals with alarming clarity the anthropological risks of the ultimate victory of simulacrum over essence in the sphere of knowledge production and the human subject.

**Keywords:** Ukrainian higher education, peripheral laboratory, neoliberalism, simulacra, hyperreality, world-systems analysis, educational “European-style” renovation, managerialism, commodification of knowledge, epistemological trap, Jean Baudrillard, human production.

## Introduction

The Ukrainian higher education system, epistemologically and reflexively blinded in many ways by its unique position, is in fact not just a particular case of regional difficulties, but a unique *crisis laboratory*, where the final stage of education’s metamorphosis from “human production” to “simulacrum production” is unfolding with alarming clarity and speed. While in the core countries of the world-system (Immanuel Wallerstein [Wallerstein, et al. 1996]), neoliberal reforms encounter resistance from entrenched academic traditions, civil society institutions, and the redistributive mechanisms of the welfare state, on the Ukrainian periphery these restraining factors are historically weakened, specifically situationally devalued, or culturally absent. This transforms the Ukrainian university space into a clean slate, where the logic of the market, commodification, and managerial control is realized in its most radical, “ideal-typical” form. To study the Ukrainian context is to study not a lag, but a leading model of the future that can await the global system of higher education under the conditions of the total victory of instrumental reason (according to Jürgen Habermas [Habermas, & McCarthy 1985]). The ontological importance of this question lies in the fact that here, as if through a magnifying glass, we see the process of the final replacement of the essence of education<sup>1</sup> with the hyperreality [Baudrillard, et al. 2022] of administrative simulacra, where the act of cognition is replaced primarily by the act of reporting. This constitutes the relevance of the research primarily at the *ontological level*.

At the *epistemological level* this relevance is dictated by the systemic – and it’s difficult to escape the feeling that it’s not accidental – blindness of mainstream research approaches. The dominant discourse in the sociology of education, often adopted without critical reflection, tends to view Ukrainian

<sup>1</sup> Namely, *Bildung* as the creation of an autonomous subject [Bruford 1975].

realities through the prism of “transition” or “catch-up modernization”. This approach unreflectively and apologetically implies that the goal is clear (Westernization, modernization, “building a market for educational services”), while the problems are technical in nature (insufficient funding, weak institutions). However, it fails to recognize in the observed processes not growing pains, but a symptom of a different, far more dramatic state. This epistemological problem is part of a broader methodological trap: research tools, themselves constructed within the neoliberal paradigm of “efficiency” and “competitiveness”, cannot adequately describe and critically evaluate a system that is a product of that same paradigm. The trap of the “doxa of intellectuals” [Grenfell 2008], once discovered by P. Bourdieu, here doubles the “thickness of the walls”, since an ideological-worldview membrane is also latently imposed on the conceptual membrane.

We don’t know how to conceptualize an educational reality that has already ceased to be a classical university, but has not yet become (and perhaps never will be, at least due to the historical and cultural specificity of its phenomena) its successful “Western” counterpart. Instead, it exists in a state of permanent (simulated) reform. Ignoring the Ukrainian case as “marginal” impoverishes critical theory not only in Ukraine but also globally, depriving it of crucial empirical material demonstrating the limits and dead ends of the neoliberal project in knowledge production.

## Methods

**The problematic situation** also manifests itself on two interconnected levels. *The ontological dimension* of the problem lies in the fact that Ukrainian higher education today represents a space of «educational European-style renovation» (“*Euroremont*”) – this metaphor, in our opinion, accurately reflects the imposition of new, often borrowed, managerial and substantive surfaces on an old, often Soviet, structural foundation without truly transforming it. The result is a system that produces not thinking subjects (Immanuel Kant, Georg Hegel [Munzel 2007; Hegel 2018]) or even “human capital” in its classical sense [Moghtader 2023], but *simulacra of competence*. Diplomas, ECTS credits, publications in journals with meager readership, accreditation reports in hundreds of volumes, “audit reports” spanning dozens of pages – all these are symbols divorced from their referents<sup>1</sup> and circulating in a self-sufficient hyperreality. The university functions as a factory for the production of such simulacra, where compliance with procedure becomes paramount, not the attainment of truth. The educational process as a difficult endeavor

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<sup>1</sup> Real knowledge, skill, intellectual influence, conceptual thinking, the intellectual community and its reproduction.

(Jean-Paul Sartre [Sartre 1972]) and self-improvement (production of oneself [Foucault 2010]) is replaced by the logic of service, where «customer satisfaction» becomes the key indicator.

**The epistemological problem** lies in the discursive occupation of the very language used to describe and reform education. Critical analysis is blocked by the total dominance of the neoliberal metanarrative, which defines concepts such as “quality” (reduced to formal criteria), “internationalization” (reduced to the number of contracts), “competitiveness” (reduced to rankings), and “diversity” (reduced to certified groups and permitted pluralisms). Alternative concepts – education as a public good, as the formation of citizenship, as a space for critical thinking – are marginalized as “impractical” and “archaic”, as “unsaleable” and “inappropriate for the labor market”. This creates a situation in which even criticism is forced to use the language of the system, thereby unwittingly reproducing its logic – for language inevitably remains a “hostile language” [Barthes 1987; Lurz 2025]. Sociology and philosophy of education, operating in this “fairway”, are increasingly drifting from a tool of analysis to one of legitimization of the existing order, preoccupied not with problematizing its foundations but with searching for ways to “optimize” it. Thus, the problem lies not only in what is happening to education, but also in our collective inability to conceive of it in any way other than in terms of the very discourse that is the source of the crisis.

**The purpose of this article** is to carry out a philosophical and sociological analysis of Ukrainian higher education as a “peripheral laboratory” in order to reveal the ontological essence of its transformation and the epistemological limitations of its understanding.

To this end, we propose the following sequence **of tasks** for the article, which we will cover in a sequence of paragraphs:

1. To conceptualize the phenomenon of the “peripheral laboratory” using the apparatus of world-systems analysis (Wallerstein) and the critical theory of neoliberalism [Harvey 2005], showing why the Ukrainian context is not an exception, but a concentrated expression of global trends.
2. Conduct an ontological analysis of the key manifestations of the crisis: examine in detail the mechanisms of “educational European-style renovation”, the simulation of scientific activity (metrics, indices) and the substitution of pedagogical interaction with the logic of service provision, based on the concepts of simulation (Jean Baudrillard) and the society of the spectacle [Guy Debord 2014].
3. To identify epistemological traps in the study of this field: to analyze how the dominant managerial and corporate discourse defines the boundaries of acceptable problematization and how social and humanitarian knowledge can (or cannot) develop a language for criticism free from the paradigms, categories and schemata of this discourse.

4. To analyze the Ukrainian context as a peripheral laboratory: to consider the situation of Ukrainian education not as a “catch-up” but as a “leading” model, where global neoliberal tendencies, not restrained by established institutions (similar to those in Western countries), manifest themselves in an exaggerated form, to identify contemporary risks (challenges) that significantly affect the educational environment of Ukraine.

Such an analysis will be intended not simply to describe yet another national system in a state of crisis, but to call into question the very universality and progressiveness of the neoliberal paradigm of reforms, seeing in its peripheral implementation its true, ontologically flawed, conceptually and existentially faceless and insipid face.

### Presentation of the main research results

#### Peripheral Laboratory: Heuristics of Experimentation in the Optics of World-Systems Analysis

Analyzing contemporary Ukrainian higher education in terms of “backwardness” or “failed modernization” has exhausted its explanatory potential, as it overlooks its systemic role in the global order of knowledge production. A more adequate and heuristically powerful concept is the “**peripheral laboratory**”, which synthesizes Wallerstein’s world-systems approach [Wallerstein, et al. 1996] and the tools of critical neoliberal theory [Harvey 2005]. This concept allows us to rethink the Ukrainian context not as an exception or anomaly, but as a concentrated and therefore indicative expression of global trends that have reached their ultimate, «pure» form here. This purity is achieved both through the weakening of “restraining” institutions and through the urgency of the “sublimation” of structures and practices, which systemically determines the absence of “impurities”.

In the sociology of science, particularly in the works of Bruno Latour [Knorr-Cetina, & Mulkay 1983], who studied “laboratory life”, we find important insights for studying the laboratory. However, the «*laboratory*» *metaphor* itself carries extraordinary heuristic potential, which is revealed in a number of ways. A laboratory is, firstly, a space of *total transparency and control*. Every process must be defined, measured, documented, and presented as data. This is precisely how the modern Ukrainian university is immersed in the logic of endless reporting, accreditations, and the fulfillment of KPIs (key performance indicators). Its activities must be visible and measurable for an external observer-manager. Eternal quantification, this nightmare of George Ritzer [Ritzer 1983] and Georg Lukács [Lukacs 2000], proves particularly destructive to education as the essential production of heterogeneity, and therefore – *not quantity, but quality*. Secondly, the laboratory *is sterile*. This is not only the absence of external “pollution”, but also – importantly

in our context – *sterility in the sense of unpredictable, living growth*, the naturalness of reproduction and multiplication. In a sterile environment only planned reactions, under total, transparent control (see above), are possible. Transposing this to education, we see that the imperative in such a laboratory will be the methodical eradication from the university of everything living, spontaneous, and uncontrolled: risky research hypotheses that do not fit into grant formats or formally required publications; pedagogical improvisation that violates the curriculum; public intellectual debates that do not promise immediate publication or ratings returns. The result is a sterile environment, safe for management, but ontologically sterile for the production of genuine knowledge and subjectivity. In this sterility, preprogrammed *cultures*<sup>1</sup> proliferate. These cultures – and this is particularly alarming to observe! – are happily implementing, for example, AI and distance learning, which for us is an absolute indicator of the essence of these cultures.

Third, the laboratory presupposes *the complete objectification of the material being studied*. The object (be it a microorganism or a chemical compound) is deprived of its own agency and exists solely as a function of the experimental setup, being meaningful only within the confines of this setup (in both senses of the word). The Ukrainian university, under neoliberal reforms, is undergoing a similar objectification: it ceases to be an autonomous subject of cultural and intellectual tradition (*universitas*) and is transformed into an object of management, a technological *frame* (*Gestell*, according to Martin Heidegger [Heidegger 2016]), a resource to be optimized.

Finally, the laboratory operates according to *a narrow set of rules and protocols* (in Latour's terms, *cycles of credit accumulation*). These protocols (point-rating systems, application instructions, citation rules, audit protocols, accreditation requirements) create a closed world where success is determined not by truth or social significance, but by precise adherence to the game's internal, often absurd, logic.

Thus, the metaphor of the laboratory does not capture a place of lag, but a specific mode of (re)production in which education becomes full of objects controlled by external protocols in conditions of artificial sterility.

This laboratory regime finds its systemic explanation and explication within the framework of *world-systems analysis*. I. Wallerstein's model, which distinguishes the core, semi-periphery, and periphery [Wallerstein 1996], is heuristically applicable to the global educational space. Core countries (North America, Western Europe) set standards, publication languages (primarily English), methodological fashions, and, crucially, define the very system of knowledge legitimization through "prestigious" journals, "significant" and "recognized" rankings (QS, THE), and institutionalized and mafia-like

<sup>1</sup> In both the microbiological and sociological senses.

citation networks. Ukraine, like many other post-Soviet and postcolonial countries, occupies a stable position on the educational periphery. Its function in the system is not the production of *benchmark knowledge*, but consumption<sup>1</sup>, adaptation, imitation, and supply of two key resources: raw materials (talented youth) and the legitimization of the global system itself through recognition, which is achieved through the «purchase» of «goods» from global producers. The easily noticeable reverence for Western frameworks and qualifications in Ukrainian education is only the most obvious and superficial example of such “purchases” and the “occupation” of the local Ukrainian “market”.

Here the mechanism of the “global educational pump” crystallizes. The peripheral laboratory produces an “intermediate product” – bachelors and masters, who, it should be noted, require the greatest “investment” of sunk and irrevocable resources. The most talented and ambitious of them, following the logic of individual competitiveness<sup>2</sup>, are “pumped” to the semi-periphery and the core to continue their education, research, and careers. Moreover, the very status of such an object of exploitation becomes sought after and prestigious; the effectiveness of working to “supply global hegemonic producers” becomes one of the performance criteria of semi-peripheral and peripheral universities. “Internships” and “exchange programs” (suspiciously one-dimensional and one-sided) become a necessary requirement not only “from the outside” but also “from the inside” for program accreditation, the creation of faculties, the institutionalization of research schools, and so on.

This “brain drain” is not an accident, but a systemic consequence of hierarchy. Simultaneously, the laboratory consumes and simulates institutional forms produced in the core: the most obvious and relevant at the moment are quality management systems, credit systems, and “entrepreneurial university” models. However, deprived of their original cultural and economic context and mechanically and unreflectively implanted into a weakened institutional environment, these forms often degenerate into pure simulacra, leaving the archaic subordination and power structure unchanged. We are witnessing a simulation of convergence, not simply preserving but multiplying peripheral dependence due to the sterilization (in both senses) of local and indigenous educational ecosystems.

Thus, the Ukrainian context is a “concentrated expression” of global trends precisely because, in a peripheral setting, lacking strong traditions of academic autonomy or a developed welfare state to serve as a buffer, neoliberal logic manifests itself in its most radical, naked form. What is mitigated in core universities by historical prestige, debate with a strong civil society,

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<sup>1</sup> And in this sense, the provision of its market for occupation by “global producers”.

<sup>2</sup> Behind which the logic of global exploitation is concealed and becomes obscure.

the powerful autonomy of the academic field (according to Pierre Bourdieu [Bourdieu 1998; Salmon 2023]) and relative financial well-being, in the peripheral laboratory appears as a rigid, uncontested mandate. Experiments in the commodification of knowledge, the total managerialization of the educational process, the corporatization of management and the structuring of routines, and the transformation of teachers into *providers of educational services* proceed here without significant resistance.

Therefore, studying the Ukrainian “laboratory” is not a study of a particular pathology, but an exploration of the ideal-typical conditions of an experiment called the “neoliberal transformation of the university”. It shows not only the immediate results<sup>1</sup>, but also a possible distant end – the final victory of the simulacrum over the essence in a sphere that by definition should be dedicated to the production of the human.

### **Ontology of Crisis: “European-Style Renovation”, the Spectacle of Transparency, and the Fetish of Metrics**

An ontological analysis of the key manifestations of the realities of reforming Ukrainian higher education reveals not just a set of dysfunctions, but a holistic system of producing a new reality – a hyperreality of simulation, in which the relationship between sign and referent is completely severed. This system functions through three interconnected mechanisms: educational “European-style renovation”, the total production of transparency as a form of spectacle, and the consistent fetishization of procedural indicators.

**1. Educational “European-style renovation” as a third-order simulacrum.** The metaphor of “European-style renovation”, which emerged in the post-Soviet cultural space, is an adequate description of simulation in Baudrillard’s sense [Baudrillard, et al. 2002]. European-style renovation is not a genuine reconstruction of a building with modifications to its supporting structures, but the imposition of new, standardized, aesthetically “modern” surfaces (drywall, suspended ceilings, plastic panels) on an old, often dilapidated foundation. This is accompanied by a fetishized and reified discourse of “Europeanness”, “modernization”, “contemporariness”, “prestige”, and “coolness”. In education, this manifests itself in the total replacement of the essential content of activity with smooth, imported forms, castrated to the point of a Deleuze-like state of “bodies without organs” [May 2005]. The implementation of Bologna credits (ECTS) often devolves into a mechanical recalculation of hours rather than a rethinking of the pedagogical process; the creation of a quality management system (QMS) results in the production of megatons of documentation for audit rather than genuine reflection on

<sup>1</sup> The erosion of content, the growth of alienation, the increase in splitting, according to G. Debord [Debord 2014].

quality; digitalization results in the filling of electronic journals and LMS platforms that simulate interaction but do not actually provide it.

As in an apartment after a European-style renovation, a “plastic life” is created here – a clean, sterile, ahistorical surface, behind and beneath which, however, a distinct, ignored, despised, suppressed, and repressed “microflora” continues to exist: informal agreements, archaic practices of “coaching”, the reproduction of paternalistic relationships, intellectual stagnation, mafia-like “agreements” and “contracts” about mutual citations, “review exchanges”, and “cross-defenses”. This hidden reality doesn’t disappear, but is preserved beneath a layer of perfectly white, yet existentially and ontologically sterile plastic – new rules that don’t generate, but rather conceal. This “European-style renovation” is a classic simulacrum, according to Jean Baudrillard [Szepanski 2024]: it disguises not just the absence of real renewal, but also the very disappearance of the original – that is, the genuine university as a community of scholars and students. It creates a hyperreality in which the presence of all the formal trappings of a “modern” university<sup>1</sup> is taken as evidence and proof of its existence.

**2. The production of transparency as a key stage in the spectacle.** In the society of the spectacle, according to Guy Debord [Debord 2014], everything that was previously directly experienced is now relegated to performance. In the Ukrainian educational laboratory, this “relegation to performance” takes the form of an obsessive, hypertrophied demonstrativeness and transparency. The university is no longer a guild organization or a closed workshop<sup>2</sup>, where knowledge is born through leisurely, not always predictable, and always at least relatively free dialogue. It becomes an open stage where every process must be displayed, measured, documented, and presented as a report. And what is characteristic is that it is precisely in this sense that such a process is extremely unfree, regulated, and spectacularized by a script. The very procedures of audit and accreditation – these founding and institutional directives and gestures – are the apotheosis of this spectacle. Their goal is not deep understanding or assistance in development, but the production of evidence of their own legitimacy and, ultimately, of their very existence, relevance and factuality for an external observer.

In this theater of transparency, all participants become prosumers of the performance (producer + consumer [Lang et al. 2020]). The instructors don’t so much teach as produce evidence of learning: they develop assessment tools, post materials in the LMS, collect student feedback, take screenshots

<sup>1</sup> Programs, committees, expensive websites, high-sounding titles, globalist affiliations of «stakeholders» and guarantors.

<sup>2</sup> Which, despite all its shortcomings, became the historical environment for the emergence of academic autonomy.

of classes, produce video recordings of exams, and create newsworthy posts on social media or the official websites of faculties and departments. The students don't so much learn as they consume these demonstrative elements and generate their own engagement – by completing assignments “for show”, participating in surveys, and “presenting” their dehumanized avatar in Zoom sessions<sup>1</sup>. The administration acts as both director and primary spectator of this performance. The essence of activity – pedagogical inquiry, intellectual effort, character development – is completely replaced by a multiplicity of transparent, verifiable simulacra. What matters is not what happened in the classroom, but how it can be presented as a graph, table, or report that meets formal criteria. Education becomes a performance, judged not by its depth, but by the flawless execution of a predetermined scenario.

**3. The fetishization of transparency and metrics.** This universal spectacle finds its metaphysical foundation in the fetishization of procedural indicators, a direct analogy to Karl Marx's commodity fetishism [Rubin 1990]. Let us recall that under capitalism, social relations between people take on the “phantasmagoric form of relations between things”. A similar process is taking place in the educational laboratory of Ukrainian commodified education: complex, ambivalent, qualitative processes of knowledge production and subjectivity are endowed with the appearance of objective, measurable things-indicators.

- The citation index or h-index is fetishized, becoming a magical sign of scientific significance, replacing the real intellectual impact and content of the work.;
- The percentage of employed graduates is turning into a fetish, hiding the real quality of employment, the adaptability of the graduate and the correspondence of the job to his education.
- The accreditation procedures themselves become a fetish, a ritual act, the performance of which (regardless of the content) guarantees legitimacy.

Why is fetishization necessary for a simulation system? Because, like commodity fetishism, it masks genuine social relations and ontological emptiness. It creates the illusion that educational management is a rational, technical process of working with objective data (“KPIs”, “metrics”, “big data”). This avoids questions of essence: What is knowledge? Who are we educating? What is the purpose of the university? Fetishized metrics obscure these questions, offering instead a convenient, quantifiable pseudo-reality. They transform political and value-based choices (*what kind of society are we reproducing?*) into administrative and technical tasks (*how to meet a target?*).

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<sup>1</sup> One of the authors' colleagues aptly compared the “grid” of these avatars to the façade of a columbarium. The depth of this philosophical metaphor awaits its connoisseur.

Thus, the fetishization of transparency is not a side effect, but the systemic core of the neoliberal transformation, ensuring its sustainability by eliminating the very possibility of an opaque, measurable, and therefore uncritical, human content of education. In the Ukrainian laboratory, deprived of the immunity provided by strong traditions of academic freedom, this process reaches its final form, revealing its ultimate goal: the replacement of the living process of education with a dead, yet perfectly tuned machine<sup>1</sup> of producing simulacra.

### **Epistemological Traps and the Intervention of Managerial Language**

The analysis of the transformation of Ukrainian higher education rests on a fundamental epistemological problem: the very tools for understanding it are occupied, or even more profoundly, constructed, by the very discourse that is subject to critique, in other words, part of the episteme as a system of knowledge and power [Foucault 2010]. The dominant managerial language doesn't simply describe reality – it actively produces it [Jenkins 2025], setting the boundaries of permissible problematization and defining what can be considered rational argument and what is marginalized as “idealism”, “archaism”, “obscurantism”, or “resistance to progress”. Thus, even a researcher who adopts a critical stance risks falling into a trap where their critique, formulated in the language of the system<sup>2</sup>, merely reproduces and reinforces its logic. To escape this trap, it is necessary to reflexively deconstruct the key categories of this discourse, which form a hermetic conceptual framework that reduces education to a purely technical activity.

**We offer, as a sketch, an analysis of some key categories of managerial discourse that form an interconnected semiotic system that replaces the language of pedagogy, philosophy and culture:**

**1. Service.** This is the cornerstone of the entire construct, bringing about an ontological revolution in the understanding of education, its interpretation, practice, discourse, and construction. Education is no longer a unique process of subjectivity formation (Bildung) [Bruford 1975], a public good, or an attribute of a sovereign individual (and in this sense, education itself was an act of subjectification). It is reduced to a market transaction between provider and consumer, and this mega-category of service, which implicitly encompasses dozens of derivatives, displaces concepts such as “education”, “upbringing”, “training”, and “cultural transmission”. As a service, education is subject to standardization, measurement, quantification, objectification,

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<sup>1</sup> And it is precisely a machine that can be perfectly tuned; any contingency of sociality constitutes the impossibility of ideality, mechanization, and algorithmicity.

<sup>2</sup> Otherwise impossible: a researcher outside of language is either “mute”, or “outcast”, or “mad” (in the Foucauldian sense), or “excluded”, or an academic “bare life” according to George Agamben [Agamben 1998].

and a focus on satisfying a demand, which immediately generates demand for subsequent categories.

**2. Stakeholder.** This subcategory of the marketing mega-metaphor atomizes the social whole, replacing the categories of “society”, “state”, “scientific community”, “tradition”, “scientific school”, “teacher”, and “student”. Students, parents, future employers, and government officials appear not as participants in a unified cultural reproduction process, but as disparate entities with conflicting interests that the university must “balance”; actors in an implicit and irresolvable conflict, not employees, not co-workers, not successors to one another, not students and teachers. Stakeholder discourse destroys the idea of the university as an institution with its own mission and autonomy, composed of co-thinking subjects, turning the university into a passive intermediary in the provision and consumption of services between external demands. This makes it impossible to formulate the question of the public good as something greater than the sum of private interests.

**3. KPI (Key Performance Indicator).** A category that operationalizes a “service” and the relationship between “expenses” and “income”, “losses” and “profits” in its provision. KPIs translate complex, ambivalent, qualitative processes<sup>1</sup> into the plane of simple (that is, further indecomposable), quantified, trackable, transparent metrics. This is a classic reduction [Whyte 2002], where what can be measured becomes more important than what is truly significant. Or, what is the same – only what is measurable and what is measured becomes significant<sup>2</sup>. The production of KPIs (attendance, number of publications, employment rates) often replaces the achievement of real educational goals, creating a simulacrum of effectiveness.

**4. Efficiency.** In this context, this isn't simply rationality, but a specific economic rationality [Boltanski, & Thevenot 2021], measured by the ratio of inputs to “results”. The spiritual, cultural, and long-term social “results” of education, which are not subject to immediate calculation, reporting, visualization, or objectification, are excluded from this equation. The category of “efficiency” a priori discredits any form of activity that doesn't lead to immediate and measurable returns, declaring them “ineffective”, “insignificant”, “inconclusive”, thereby reducing effectiveness to efficiency.

**5. Visibility (transparency).** This is, in fact, an epistemological imperative of the society of the spectacle [Debord 2014]: a process that hasn't become “visible” in the form of a report, a graph, a figure on a website, or a publication in an indexed database is considered non-existent. The hypertrophied production of visibility through electronic document management systems,

<sup>1</sup> Depth of understanding, development of critical thinking, formation of values, comprehension of truth.

<sup>2</sup> This is essentially what the slogans of «publish» or «not published – does not exist» are about.

portfolios, public reports, audit documents, and formal certificates leads to energy being spent not on activity but on its representation. Energy and time, the two key resource foundations of any system, are invested in existence through representation instead of substance. This creates a gap between the real, often chaotic and creative, life of the university and its polished, sleek, and simulacrum-like image, polished for the outside observer.

**6. Management.** This category displaces the concepts of “management”, “leadership”, “administration”, and especially “servant” (as in the rector’s position as a servant of the corporation). Management presupposes working with impersonal processes and resources, not with people in their subjectivity [Grint 1995]. Management becomes human resource management, educational resource management, time management. In the crucible of management, the diversity of complexity management is melted and fused. Instead of homogeneous management of heterogeneity, the university is reduced to the homogeneous management of homogeneity. Faculty and students become “human resources” subject to optimal allocation, and the language of management (“strategy”, “optimization”, “benchmarking”, “marketing” etc.) displaces the language of pedagogy and science, reducing meaningful discussions of goals to technical discussions of methods for achieving externally specified indicators.

**7. Funding.** In discourse, it rarely appears as an investment in the future of society or culture, but almost exclusively as “budgeting”, “fund allocation”, or “attracting extra-budgetary sources”. The emphasis shifts from the question “why?” (what goal are we funding) to the questions «*how much?*» and «*from where?*» This locks thinking into a constant struggle for survival, funding, and cost recovery, making long-term strategic planning based on a mission impossible and encouraging short-term, grant-seeking activity tailored to current events.

**8. Accessibility.** In its pared-down, managerial understanding, this category has been reduced primarily to physical and financial accessibility (number of places, tuition fees), then to information accessibility (availability of data on a website), and ultimately to a variation of transparency. At the same time, the fundamental humanistic dimension of accessibility has disappeared: accessibility as an opportunity for everyone to realize their intellectual and spiritual potential, accessibility as an introduction to high culture and knowledge, accessibility as a connection to the individual and their life, scale, and practice. Accessibility has become a technical parameter of the system, not its ethical foundation, despite the discursive derivation of ethics, responsibility, and personal focus, which the discourse of accessibility in education openly abuses.

**9. Diversity** is often understood superficially as a variety of educational programs or modes of instruction. Within the system, it primarily serves

marketing purposes to attract a larger number of “consumer-stakeholders”. At the same time, the deeper meaning of intellectual and methodological diversity, the pluralism of opinions and approaches as the foundation of academic freedom and the search for truth, is diluted. Diversity becomes a commodity, which is further exacerbated by the inversion of diversity into (in fact, extremely questionable from the point of view of problematic for the Ukrainian education system) variety.

**10. Competitiveness.** This is one of the most potentially totalizing categories, subordinating many previous ones, as well as unifying and turning alien and heterogeneous categories of understanding education into “bare life” [Agamben 1998]. It defines the purpose of a university’s existence not as serving truth or society, but as winning the global rankings race. Competitiveness projects the laws of the market onto knowledge production, forcing the university to strive not for depth but for breadth on the surface, not for essence but for visibility; not for the development of citizens, but for the attractiveness of the “brand” for applicants and employers.

These categories form a hermetic framework that technologizes subjects and thereby desubjectifies them. Their coherence constitutes a closed semiotic circle – an (anti)herme(neu)tic framework within which the thinking of the modern educational subject is confined. The student, conceived as both a “service consumer” and “human capital”, is forced to play by the rules dictated by KPIs – score points, obtain credits, build a portfolio. Their educational trajectory is transformed into a technical task of optimizing personal “competitiveness”. Questions of meaning, value, and personal growth find no place in this vocabulary and are therefore marginalized as “outdated” or “impractical”. The teacher, reduced to a “service provider” and a “manager of the educational process”, finds himself in a double bind. On the one hand, he must produce a semblance (reports, publications in the “certified” and “right” journals, indicators for audit documents) that meets the criteria of “effectiveness” in order to obtain “funding”. On the other hand, he is forced to communicate with the student-consumer in the language of “accessibility” and “service”, where the criterion of success becomes client satisfaction, not intellectual challenge. His pedagogical skill and scientific intuition are replaced by the skill of creating curricula that meet formal accreditation requirements and the ability to «sell» his course.

This gives rise to mutually alienating flows of

- a) “internal emigration”, that is, faculty members who retreat into “formalized fulfillment of the required” with a complete refusal to conform to official educational structures and (at best) “shadow” activity that reproduces the autonomous sacredness of the university;

b) a “loyalist flash mob”, that is, teachers who obsequiously follow the wind, grasp the trends and demands, and are ahead of the curve in seeking opportunities to find employment.

Thus, the epistemological trap lies in the fact that any criticism formulated within this discourse is doomed to failure. Complaints about “insufficient efficiency” only increase the pressure of KPIs; demands to “improve the service” reinforce the service model; and disputes over “funding” leave aside the question of goals and meanings. Social science and the humanities face a paradox: to criticize the system, they are forced to use its own language, thereby legitimizing it.

Is a way out possible? It requires a conscious effort to develop an extraterritorial language of criticism. This requires:

1. **A return to forgotten or repressed ontological categories:** *Bildung*, *paideia*, knowledge-as-truth, community of scholars (*universitas*), public good, autonomy, duty, service, student (not consumer), production (not service).
2. **The use of “opaque” languages:** metaphors (such as “European-quality renovation”, “laboratory”), poetics, philosophical symbols (simulacrum, performance, *Gestell*), which break the hermetic seal of managerial jargon.
3. **The practice of radical questioning:** not “how can we achieve KPIs?”, but “why does the university exist?”; not “how can we increase stakeholder satisfaction?”, but “what kind of person and what kind of society are we producing?”.

Only by making such an epistemological effort to transcend imposed discourse can critical thought in sociology and philosophy cease to be the system’s “useful idiot” and acquire genuine power to demystify it. Studying the Ukrainian “laboratory” is valuable precisely as an extreme case of this conceptual captivity, making the need to find a new language not an academic whim, but a condition for intellectual and social survival.

### Novelty.

#### Ukrainian Education as a Peripheral Laboratory Neoliberal Transformation in the Context of Modern Challenges

An analysis of the position of Ukrainian education in the context of the world system allows us to view it not as a lagging, eternally catching-up segment, but as a unique «*peripheral laboratory*» where global neoliberal tendencies manifest themselves in a naked, hypertrophied, and often absurd form. This “advanced” model of crisis arises in a context where powerful traditional Western institutions that historically served as shock absorbers<sup>1</sup> have been

<sup>1</sup> A developed civil society, strong professional associations, ingrained academic culture, powerful traditions of science and education, the entire superstructure that acquires a logic autonomous from the base.

weakened or destroyed in the Ukrainian context (or even become completely alien to the emerging commodified social order) by the post-Soviet transition. As a result, market logic is invading here with minimal resistance, turning the university into a clean testing ground for experiments in the commodification of knowledge and subjectivity. From this point of view, it seems very important not only to describe the emerging situation in Ukrainian higher education, but also to focus on those risks (challenges) that significantly affect the educational process at the university and the overcoming of which, in our opinion, is extremely necessary for the implementation of the human-creating mission of the university.

A key metaphor describing this transformation is that of “European-style renovation”, most prominently applied to Ukrainian culture in the 2000s. “European-style renovation” is not a profound restructuring, but the imposition of new, essentially simulative surfaces on an old, problematic structure, which “shines through” these simulative surfaces. In education, this can manifest itself as a total replacement of the essential content – the educational process as human production – with its external, managerial simulacra (see the escapades of the aforementioned Terry Eagleton on this subject [Eagleton 2015]). As a result, universities risk actively implementing scoring and rating systems that do not measure the depth of understanding, but merely translate the educational process into numerical indicators. They risk expanding testing practices and creating the appearance of “internationalization” through formal partnerships; and accreditation procedures risk becoming focused on the endless production of reporting documents rather than on genuine improvements in the quality of teaching and research. This educational “European-style renovation” is a direct analog of “replaceable surfaces, plasterboard, and plastic” in architecture: it creates a cheap but superficially attractive semblance of “progress” and “integration into global space”, easily reassemblable, unrooted in time and tradition, and lacking defenders among those who have invested too much time and effort into it. The result is the threat of this semblance of “progress” spreading to ever more university spaces, physically displacing the “unworthy” reality of genuine knowledge and critical thought.

Overcoming the current risks of educational reforms in higher education is directly linked to the implementation of university autonomy as the realization of self-governance and independence of higher education institutions in their research practices, educational processes, and personnel matters, as well as the incorporation of the principle of academic freedom into university life. Testing practices and point-rating assessment systems can be introduced into the educational process not as stand-alone tools for determining students’ knowledge, but as auxiliary tools that formalize, systematize, and streamline the ongoing and final assessment of students’ efforts in acquiring knowledge.

Accreditation procedures for specialties and even universities themselves can certainly be analyzed and understood from the perspective of confirming the quality of education. However, auditors' attention should be focused not so much on the correct execution of relevant documents, but on the content of the educational process. The quality of education can be understood not as the quality of the documents prepared and presented, but as the corresponding level of knowledge, skills, and competencies of graduates. These skills represent not just a specific set of attributes, but the necessary conditions and means for self-realization, spiritual development, and the development and actualization of humanity. It is from this perspective that the educational activities of higher education institutions must be assessed.

The situation in Ukrainian education is exacerbated by Ukraine's peripheral status in the global division of academic labor [Readings 1997]. Situated on the outskirts of the world-system, Ukrainian education is forced to borrow and imitate foreign models, deprived of their original cultural and institutional context; to submit to alien forms, even to the point of outright prosthetics, such as "PhD" instead of "candidate of sciences". Even such a large-scale project as the European integration of Ukrainian education often boils down in practice to rhetoric and the mechanical transfer of procedures, which only reinforces the simulative nature of the transformations. Educational policy begins to focus not on the production of its own, sovereign knowledge, but on the fabrication of signs of compliance with external standards, which themselves are a product of the same neoliberal logic. In the terms of Baudrillard, the system closes in on itself, producing simulacra for simulacra.

In such a laboratory environment, the space of Ukrainian higher education appears to be an *exceptionally important object* for critical analysis, since the following risks are becoming increasingly evident and referential:

- **the hypertrophy of managerialism:** the administrative apparatus of universities, subordinated exclusively to the logic of reporting and the fulfillment of formal indicators, is already striving to surpass the academic core itself in numbers and influence, and knowledge management is completely replaced by document management;
- **absurdity as a systemic quality:** control and evaluation procedures give rise to situations that, from the perspective of classical academic rationality, appear frankly absurd – from the requirement to publish articles in journals with a minimal readership, but included in the "required" citation databases, to the organization of the educational process in which preparation for endless tests and form filling displaces actual learning;
- **social rift as a consequence:** this process is exacerbated by the internal fragmentation of Ukrainian society, which contributes to the formation of "two conditional communities" – those who are forced to physically remain within this system, and those who have the resources to leave it,

intensifying the drain of intellectual capital and increasing social tensions and frictions.

Thus, the Ukrainian educational context acts as a kind of magnifying glass, allowing us to discern the distant yet inevitable consequences of the global neoliberal trend for education as a whole. What in the West is still mitigated by the inertia of old institutions and the redistributive mechanisms of the welfare state<sup>1</sup> can be discovered in the Ukrainian “laboratory” in its pure, concentrated form: education, which has ultimately lost its corporeal function of producing human subjectivity, is demonstrating a tendency to transform into a factory for the production of simulacra serving market logic. Studying the educational practices of Ukrainian universities here proves not only a particular issue on the Ukrainian agenda but also a pressing task for the entire critical philosophy and sociology of education, for it, like a drop of water, reflects the possible future of the university as an institution on a global scale.

### Conclusion

The analysis allows us to formulate a fundamental conclusion that extends far beyond national issues: the study of Ukrainian higher education is not a peripheral or narrow specialization, but represents a central and urgent task for global philosophy, sociology, and critical education theory. The Ukrainian “peripheral laboratory” turns out to be not the backwaters of the global academic process, but its avant-garde experimental zone, where the anthropological and social risks of the total commodification of knowledge and the human subject are revealed in a concentrated, naked form.

This status of “central task” is determined by several key aspects identified in the study:

**1. An ideal-typical model of neoliberal transformation:** in the Ukrainian context, where the resistance of strong autonomous institutions (academic corporations, professional communities, *Bildung*, *traditions*) has been historically weakened, the logic of the market, managerialism, and simulation is realized with minimal obstacles. Here, one can observe a “pure experiment” in replacing the educational paradigm with a service-based one. What occurs gradually in the universities of the “core” world-system, mitigated by the inertia of tradition and redistributive policies, is realized rapidly and radically in the Ukrainian laboratory. Therefore, its study allows:

- **to predict the trajectory of the crisis’s development** on a global scale, having seen its probable final stages – the complete displacement of essence

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<sup>1</sup> As well as by the position of countries at the core of the global capitalist world-system, which allows for the “mitigation” of crisis phenomena through financial, exploitative, and other mechanisms.

by simulacrum, the total fetishization of metrics, and the disintegration of the university as an intellectual community;

- **to identify the inherent contradictions and limits of the neoliberal project** in the field of education, which in more favorable conditions are masked by the resource endowment and symbolic capital of prestigious universities.

**2. A demonstration of anthropological risk, namely, the end of “human production”.** The Ukrainian case demonstrates with alarming clarity the consequences of reducing education to a service. It demonstrates not an economic failure, but an anthropological catastrophe – the systemic destruction of the very mechanism of human reproduction as a cultural and moral subject. In the terms of Norbert Elias, the «civilizing process»<sup>1</sup> is replaced by the «process of simulation», i.e. the formation of an apparatus for the production of appearances. The difficult effort of self-overcoming, the essence of education for Jean-Paul Sartre, is declared ineffective and replaced by the consumption of educational products. The university ceases to be a space for autopoiesis and poetry, the self-creation of the individual, and becomes a factory for churning out simulacra of competence (Baudrillard). Studying this process in the laboratory conditions of Ukraine is a study of how the very possibility of *Bildung* is being destroyed in the 21st century.

**3. An exposition of the epistemological trap in its complete form.** Ukrainian discourse on education represents a near-clinical case of the complete capture of language by managerial categories (“service”, “KPI”, “stakeholder”). This allows:

- **to clearly see how a hermetic conceptual framework** not only describes but also constitutes reality, making alternative approaches unthinkable;
- **analyze the mechanisms that block critical reflection** within the system, when any disagreement is forced to appeal to the criteria of the system itself (demanding “greater efficiency” or “better management”), thereby strengthening it;
- **to recognize the urgent need to develop a new, extraterritorial language of criticism** that could bring back into the discussion ontological categories (good, truth, duty, community, service, value) and metaphorical images (“European-style renovation”, “laboratory”) that break the stifling hermeticity of managerial newspeak.

**4. A warning about social consequences: from the university to society.** The educational crisis in the laboratory does not remain within its

<sup>1</sup> The formation of an apparatus of self-control, the complication of mental organization through culture [Elias 2000].

walls, but produces social effects that are visible in a hypertrophied form in Ukrainian society:

- **the reproduction of social inequality** under the guise of “competitiveness” and “accessibility”, when a simulacrum diploma merely legitimizes existing hierarchies;
- **the formation of an atomized individual consumer**, deprived of a language for expressing common interests and understanding oneself as part of a cultural and historical community;
- **the loss of society’s capacity for critical self-reflection and the production of a collective future**, since the institution responsible for this function is busy producing reports and simulating activities.

Thus, to ignore the Ukrainian case is to ignore not only the “private difficulties on the outskirts”, but rather to overlook the key experiment (both its “key” nature and its experimental essence) of our time in reassembling the social and the human through the logic of the market. Studying it calls into question complacent narratives about “progress” and “modernization” in global higher education. It forces philosophy and sociology to answer a challenge: is a return to education as “human production” possible today, after the triumph of simulation? Or does the “peripheral laboratory” reveal our common future – a sterile, transparent, and subjectless world in which there is nothing to learn because there is no one to learn and no need to learn? The answer to this question, formulated through the prism of the Ukrainian experience, is not a regional specificity, but a central question about the fate of knowledge and humanity in the 21st century.

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**Олександр Голіков, Сергій Голіков. Українська вища освіта як периферійна лабораторія неоліберальної трансформації: онтологія бездушності проти/та епістемологія сліпоти**

**Актуальність.** Статтю присвячено філософсько-соціологічному аналізу трансформації української системи вищої освіти, що розглядається авторами як «периферійна лабораторія» глобальних неоліберальних реформ. **Метою** цієї статті є проведення філософсько-соціологічного аналізу вищої освіти України як «периферійної лабораторії» з метою розкриття онтологічної сутності її трансформації та епістемологічних обмежень її розуміння. **Методи.** У межах зокрема світ-системного підходу автори доводять, що ослабленість традиційних інститутів в українському контексті дозволило логіці ринку, менеджеріалізму та коммодифікації реалізуватись у найбільш радикальній, «ідеально-типовій» формі. Згідно з логікою статті, це перетворює Україну не на приклад відставання, а на випереджальну модель кризи, яка оголює можливе майбутнє університету у глобальному масштабі. **Новизна.** У статті аргументується, що онтологічна сутність кризи полягає у заміні сутності освіти (Bildung) виробництвом симулякрів. Цей процес розкривається через метафору «освітнього євроремонту» – накладання нових управлінських поверхонь на старий фундамент без справжнього перетворення. Спираючись на теорію Ж. Бодрийяра, автори показують, як ключові елементи системи – дипломи, метрики, акредитаційні звіти – стають симулякрами, знаками, відірваними від референтів реального знання та компетентності, та циркулюють у самодостатній гіперреальності. Гіперреальність розглядається як породжена моделями реальність, яка більше не пов'язана з будь-яким оригіналом, де карта передуює території. **Висновки.** На гносеологічному рівні автори виявляють системну пастку: саму мову опису та критики освіти окуповано менеджерським дискурсом («послуга», «KPI», «стейкхолдер», «ефективність»). Це робить практично неможливим формулювання альтернатив у категоріях, що виходять за межі неоліберальної парадигми. Стверджується, що вивчення українського кейсу є центральним завданням для глобальної критичної теорії, оскільки в цій «лабораторії» з лякаючою наочністю видно антропологічні ризики остаточної перемоги симулякра над сутністю у сфері виробництва знання та людського суб'єкта.

**Ключові слова:** вища освіта України, периферійна лабораторія, неолібералізм, симулякри, гіперреальність, світ-системний аналіз, освітній "євроремонт", менеджеріалізм, коммодифікація знання, гносеологічна пастка, Жан Бодрийяр, виробництво людського.

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