

## »Scientism« against science in a socialist regime\*

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### Summary

1. I want to extend the discussion of science – religion relationship and enclose it in the social and political context of the events that affected Central and Eastern Europe in the last century, and in particular to the (moral and partially physical) destruction of the scientific community by the communist regime. Needless to say, *recovery of the academic community*, and the middle class as a whole, is one of the issues which are crucial for the democratic and prosperous evolution of the post-communist countries in our region, for their future, as well as for the future of Europe as a whole.

This turned out to be much more complex and difficult process than was anticipated in 1989, the year of euphoria and great expectations; we now realize that it will take a very long time, patience and enormous efforts. This is probably the most urgent – and difficult – problem facing these societies, especially the intellectuals, and in a specific way it will require the engagement of catholic intellectuals. This also explains my personal motivation to pay special attention to this issue, here and in other places.

It is therefore necessary to diagnose *the reasons* for this destruction, *the methods* used, and to analyse the present situation, i.e. the inherited *damage*, in order to address the difficult problems of recovery and regeneration. I want to emphasize two particular phenomena, typical for the former Yugoslav regime, in contrast to the countries of the former Soviet bloc, and therefore less well known. These are the» «self-management» with all its pathological variations, and a form of extreme «scientism».

2. Reasons for the destruction of the middle class by the communist regime are obvious, - the desire of the Communist Party to achieve absolute power and control of the society. Middle class, which consisted of various elite and professional segments of the society, posed a potential threat to this absolute power, and therefore it was to be eliminated. (This permanent conflict between politicians and other social elites is always present, even in democratic societies, but there it is modified and/or suppressed by the public responsibility of the politicians to «perform», so that they have to cooperate and reach a consensus with others, in order to achieve long-term national interests. In a totalitarian system this control mechanism does not exist!)

3. Methods used by the ruling Communist Party were various and changed with time and circumstances.

Immediately after World War II the victorious communist leaders adopted the radical view that the bourgeois class had to be destroyed, and they indeed started with

“liquidations” of the «class enemies», «collaborators», «enemies of the people», etc., so that the number of people murdered after the War in fact *exceeded* the number of victims during the War. (Careful analysis of these tragic events would show the combined effects of the war fighting against the nazi-fascist aggressors, communist ideological revolution and the struggle for and against the continuation of the Serb-dominated (royalist or communist) Yugoslavia. This led to massacres on an unprecedented scale, and the victims were even peasants because of their relative independence and conservative-Christian attitudes.)

The «liquidations» continued and produced enormous human suffering, until the new rulers realized that the country and their system could not function without qualified people, without the the detested «bourgeois»; they were needed as some kind of “serfs”, and thus their lives were spared, but they were reduced to second-class citizens without any social impact.

4. Next phase was a copy of a more pragmatic Soviet approach. Unlike the situation in social sciences and humanities, because of specific needs in industrial and especially military development, “technical intelligentsia”, i.e. experts in «hard» sciences and engineering, were not only tolerated but some even enjoyed privileged status (provided they served well and abstained from politics). This division was obvious e.g. at the University of Zagreb and in the “independent” research institutes (analogous to the Soviet-style academies), where the Party exercised only loose (but sufficient) control over activities in science and engineering. This support and relatively tolerant atmosphere in that period led to substantial development e.g. of natural sciences in Croatia, with a number of independent-minded scientists of international reputation.

5. However, in politically more sensitive fields of social sciences and humanities the Party members absolutely dominated and various ideological committees constantly controlled and terrorized all scientists. But, even this was not enough, and here is exactly where the first rumblings and dissonant sounds were heard. It is significant that the regime was occasionally criticized from inside and by the prominent intellectuals in the Party (members of «nomenklatura»!), not from the conservative or liberal side but usually from the extreme left position. This internal dissent was much more dangerous than some external “bourgeois” criticism, which could be (and was) easily suppressed.

Together with other, e.g. economic problems, this was certainly one of the reasons that led to the introduction of the third – and most efficient - method of control, connected with the transformation of Yugoslav communism from the Soviet rigid model to the more flexible “permanent revolution” (or “controlled chaos”) system, similar to the Chinese, and embodied in the “self-management” dogma.

6. Briefly: The trick was to install very elaborate, complicated and intentionally inefficient “democratic” procedures at all levels, with numerous elections of representatives, endless meetings and discussions of trivial issues, and “decisions”, which was, of course, all fake, because Party officials controlled absolutely all decisions of any importance. However, this “make-believe” democracy created continuous internal conflicts among the frustrated participants, which also led to the fragmentation of institutions, enterprises and other organizations into smaller “self-

managing” units, also often mutually confronted. Also, this process was destroying their organic unity.

Of course, the main result was that the Party was now relieved of any responsibility and at the same time had absolute power.

7. Transfer and application of this system from the factory floor to the academic institutions immediately removed any danger of criticism or pressure on the Party that could have arisen from the ranks of scientists.

E.g. the University of Zagreb was now divided into some 40 or more “independent” units – faculties, institutes, library, student homes, etc., with no organic connections, and faculties and institutes were further divided into smaller units. The University governing bodies had purely ceremonial functions – they had no power to govern, neither externally - as devised by the Party, nor internally, which led to the inefficiency and gradual erosion of the University. Even the positive achievements of the previous phase, e.g. in natural sciences were fast disappearing (together with the expatriate scientists!).

It is interesting to notice that even after the “fall of communism” in 1990 it was not possible to reconstruct this loose confederation of “units” into a normal university – obviously the same centrifugal forces were (and still are!) in action!

8. Now I come to the second dogma which contributed to the mental deformations in the scientific community, and which can be related to «scientism» in its worst emanations. This was the systematic misuse of the term *science*, its extension to what was and what was not science: it was proclaimed that *science could and should solve all the problems of the society*, of the «working class», improve the standard of living, provide reduction of the imports, etc., etc.

While most people probably were not even aware of the true situation (as can be said for most other societies!), I am convinced that the authors of this planned confusion intentionally suppressed the necessary distinctions (even if sometimes fuzzy!) between fundamental sciences, oriented basic research, applied research and development, the differences in their goals, methods, organization, planning, evaluation and, of course, their funding. *Everything was “science”*, even quality control in a production process, or simple technology transfer. Unfortunately, but understandably, in this obscure game politicians were able to find support and collaboration among some scientists, always prepared to accommodate and bend their ethical and professional principles.

As a consequence, financing or scientific research was transferred to the paragonovernmental bodies, where “providers of services” – i.e. scientists, had to convince “users of services”, i.e. representatives of some industrial or other sectors, that their projects were worth support and will result in some quick financial gain. This encounter between the two groups with basically different interests and approaches created frictions and led to gross misunderstandings, which were then resolved – as usual – by the unspoken (but firm) decision of various Party bodies.

9. Another consequence of this system, i.e. the combination of «self-management» and «scientism», is that the professional – institutional – responsibility disappeared because institutions had no internal structure nor power. Professional standards were determined only by individual motivation and character, but were neither stimulated nor required – the Party only needed political accomodation or passivity. This unfortunately «corrupted» large numbers of otherwise decent and correct scientists who accepted this deal offered by the Party – little or no work, no professional discipline or responsibility, but no «dangerous» initiative or troublemaking.

10. It is almost impossible for the people without personal experience with this cynical, hypocritical and perversely efficient system to fully understand how quickly it destroyed academic institutions (as well as all other structures in a society!) and how deeply it distorted the mentality and ethics of most people (including those fighting against it!). In fact, *this is by far the worst and longest lasting damage resulting from the Communist period.* Because it is an unexpected and new social phenomenon it will require adequate and careful analysis, and a long term «therapy».

We have to find the method, the principles upon which to base this «therapy». I believe that in this process, in the spiritual renewal of our societies, *the (re)introduction and affirmation of a value system based on Christian principles will be an essential step,* just as the (moral) destruction of the academic community (and the middle class in general) started with and was based on the destruction of exactly these values.