

When Edward J. Hackett (1990) coined the term “academic capitalism”, Poland's higher education and science system was entering a new era. The beginning of the capitalist transformation impacted the system heavily. A deep transformation of the real socialist structure of science and higher education occurred and aligned the system with the new reality. Rapid expansion of private, not-for-profit (formally) institutions and fee-based public higher education stood out. Its’ task was to absorb the growing and largely unsatisfied demand for higher education. However, the transformations were far more profound and reached the foundations of the system – socialist higher education was supposed to give birth to academic capitalism. The severe decline in public funding, which in socialist Poland was rarely at satisfactory levels, occurred in the early 1990s. Like other areas of the public sector, higher education and science received a profound “shock therapy”.

Nevertheless, the conditions for creating academic capitalism in Poland differed markedly from those found in the classical descriptions. Firstly, academic capitalism developed within the major capitalist economies. In contrast, Poland was transitioning from peripheries of the Soviet world-economy to peripheries of the capitalist world-system. Secondly, the capitalist system in the countries where academic capitalism developed had a long history. On the contrary, the Polish higher education system at the threshold of the 1990s was linked to a socialist centrally-planned economy. Thirdly, as part of the relationship with capital in central countries, higher education and science had a long tradition of service for its needs. In Poland, the system had a stable connection with the industry sector that was about to disappear due to closures, restructuration and privatisation. Fourthly, academic institutions in these countries have long undergone a process of massification, and the Polish system, despite the socialist promises, was still in the elite stage of access provision.

This study aims to explain the emergence and development of a particular form of capitalism in the sphere of science and higher education in Poland, in the period from 1990 to 2021. In doing so, its aim is to create a new theory to systematically capture the dynamics of the development of academic capitalism in Poland. The objectives complementing the main task include investigating: the role of international organisations (such as the OECD and the World Bank) in the emergence of academic capitalism in Poland, the role and scale of resistance of academics and students to implemented changes, as well as the importance of large commercial academic publishers in shaping academic policy in the sector.

Peripheral academic capitalism is understood here as a system with a specific configuration of relations between the state, the market and higher education and with conditions and patterns of production that differ from the central ones. Its development depends on the discourse of international organisations as well as central science and higher education systems. Peripheral academic capitalism is also susceptible to penetration by international capital, instrumentalising for its purposes the activities within it.

An extensive empirical study will gather material to support the formulation of theoretical framework. 28 case studies will be conducted, including on organisations mediating the establishment of capitalist relations in the sector (such as ranking agencies, commercial academic publishers or consultancies) and academic institutions. There will be 112 interviews with experts and representatives of different parts of the science and higher education system (managers of the institutions, as well as trade union representatives). Two databases will be created containing information on protests in the sector during the period under study, as well as on the degree of concentration of publications by Polish scientists in the channels of major commercial publishers.

As a result of conducting extensive research, the project will gather knowledge on the ways in which the capitalist reality of Polish higher education operates, as well as describe the main narratives and actors responsible for the shape that the development of academic capitalism has taken. We will learn how the public policies calculated to transform this sector into a functioning academic capitalism were shaped, who was responsible for the discourses developed within it, how they were influenced by international organisations, how students and academics resisted the changes introduced, or finally, what role private capital concentrated mainly in the sector of large academic commercial publishing houses played in shaping its present form. Finally, we will find out to what extent and why the form of academic capitalism that emerged in Poland differs from that which developed in the countries of the centre of the capitalist world-system. The study will make it possible to go beyond the unproductive opposition between liberal modernisers who want to copy ready-made solutions from central countries and conservative opponents of subordinating "Polish science" to Western models in the discussion on the changes in the sector.