

Anatomija destrukcije: politička ekonomija hrvatskog visokog školstva

An Anatomy of Destruction:
the Political Economy
of Croatian Higher Education

PETAR FILIPIĆ

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In February 2104, Jesenski and Turk the publishers issued the book *An Anatomy of Destruction: the Political Economy of Croatian Higher Education* by Professor Petar Filipić from Split University's Economics Faculty. The book consists of 15 chapters that, together with the introduction, list of references, index and short notes about the writer constitute a whole of 287 pages bound in a cover with a striking illustration on the cover. The writing is supplemented with 15 graphs and 37 tables that provide the analytical contribution of the author to a more complete understanding of the system by which higher education is financed in Croatia. The author has made use of 82 literature references, parts of books of older dates and scholarly and expert articles and project studies of more recent times.

For a number of years the author has studied the higher education system, not only out of dry economic curiosity but also in the glass of socio-economic and political changes and events that as a member of the academic community he has personally witnessed. In the thematic units the author critically re-examines, and provides an insight into, the state of the higher education system in Croatia.

After a foreword, in the first chapter the author explains the reasons for the existence of the book, and in the second gives an account of the problems he met in the process of data collection. Here already the reader is introduced to the key weakness of the system of higher education – lack of transparency and excessive discretion in management and decision making. In part three, the author expounds his proposition about the neo-liberal paradigm and higher education in Croatia, which he connects to the greatest number of the reasons for the origin of the existing structural problems in higher education, explained in detail in the subsequent chapters.

Part four is a picture of Croatian higher education or a story of the market for services in higher education. It is in fact a sketch for the understanding of a system that works according to a semi-market and a semi-state principle. The behaviour of individuals and institutions depends directly on the financial situation in the country or on the market, and the fifth part of the book analyses the work and functioning of institutions competent for the evaluation of tertiary education facilities and scientific institutions. Doubt is voiced as to the objectives of accreditation that have been transformed into the fulfilment of quantitative goals according to which higher education facilities are evaluated and according to which their fate is determined.

Part six discusses the many dilemmas that have arisen with the development of private colleges in conjunction with the gradual erosion of the positions of the public facilities and the preferential treatment of private colleges through laws and regulations as well as by direct lobbying via the mediation of public policies. No one sensible can be against private education, but if the state is not supporting the public sector, it would be advisable at least to ensure equal conditions for the two sectors. In part seven, there is a well-grounded criticism of the system of ineffective funding and academic silence that the system supports. The need to rethink

the whole of the system consisting of budget, the main source of funding, the university and its faculties, the students and the social environment is subjected to well-founded criticism. If at least one part of the unit in the analysis is missing, it is hard to expect the elaboration of a common-sense strategy or a good law to govern the area of higher education.

Parts eight and nine are directed towards the problem of promotion and excellence. In brief, as a result of the non-existence of any consistent scientific policy, individuals are encouraged to adjust their academic excellence to the criterion of maximum utility and minimum cost. In truth, most teachers and associates achieve with great effort references of academic excellence and have worthwhile results. However, for the author what is an important problem is the incoherent and poor system within which individuals seek (and find) shortcuts to undeserved privileges. Unluckily, it is these very individuals that set the criterion for the whole academic community, which has not found any way to prevent the erosion of the system through the existing legislative background. Chapter nine is a discussion about excellence that diminishes excellence and the questions concerning the established criteria for the evaluation of academic books and science papers. Chapter ten analyses the role of the trade unions and their submergence into the system for the maintenance of the status quo.

The two next chapters (eleven and twelve) are dedicated to the happiest part of the populations of Croatian society – the students and their fortune – they are happy, but they are also open-handedly funded by state subsidy programmes.

In chapter thirteen, the author refers to the need for a moral revision of the system of higher education and for improvement in governance. In the last chapter he criticises the short-sightedness implicit in the doctrine of neo-liberalism and refers to the need to develop real and not merely formal university autonomy, which is not in the domain of the academy and the government. The universities still have to win their way to real autonomy, which would mean a fundamental change in the manner in which colleges and universities are financed and organised.

Professor Filipić shows fairly clearly the economic effects of the many “political and policy” interventions of representatives of government, which frequently have too little understanding of the organisation, structure, financing and all the other accompanying problems of the higher education system in the phases of transformation. Unfortunately, this lack of understanding has spilled over onto other stakeholders. The Croatian system of higher education is far from any serious transformation, for in its mind set it is deep in the past time of the egalitarian provision of goods and services.

The author refers to the many structural difficulties of higher education, and is often indeed too mild in the description of the stakeholders and their decisions, the consequences that they have had on society and the derogation of the importance

of higher education in society. Although the author links most of the structural problems of higher education in Croatia with the neo-liberal paradigm, the reader does not necessary have to agree with this interesting and provocative thesis, for it seems that it is closer in Croatia to an anarchic-cum-liberal paradigm, with weak and opaque institutions. And after all, when was the liberal doctrine used and dominant in higher education in social communities in this region?

There is no doubt that the author of the book, through a semi-relaxed style of writing, is addressing the general population of readers who are not necessarily economists, engineers, lawyers or philosophers. In fact, every interested individual can find “a truth for himself or herself” in the book in the effort made to explain and understand the trends in the higher education of a country in the process of transformation.

The political economy of Croatian higher education would perhaps be better called *the political economy of the Croatian university* (which does not actually exist in operational terms). In a possible second edition the book might have a still more vigorous review of the practice (and why not financial too) management and organisation of the universities and colleges. It would not hurt if the author were to delve a little into the link between family and management in the Croatian academic community, the many campuses that have been built but not moved into.

The major part of the book is founded on numerous domestic, foreign and personal scientific investigations by the author. This kind of evidence-based work, with a light and fluid manner of writing, will more easily capture the reader’s interest. True, non-economists might find some parts of the writing wearisome because of the many figures, but the explanations underneath the tables are quite enough for a good insight into the structure and message of the individual chapters.

For the writing of books like this, it is necessary to combine knowledge, experience, curiosity and youthful buoyancy. Petar Filipić is one of the few professors and economists in Croatia to have succeeded. What is more, he has turned his temperament, dynamism and unrelenting examination of the surroundings into a book that could have a broader social and regional influence, and perhaps be a good motivation for us to reconsider our (lack of) engagement in the system of higher education policies.

This, then, is a useful work about the financing, organisation and functioning of the system of higher education that will not leave its readers indifferent. It moves far outside the framework of classic university teaching material, for in a considerably easier manner it addresses the broader population of readers. The themes discussed are important and will probably have their place in scholarly, professional and other social debates. There is no doubt that the book will draw the special attention not only of experts and scholars but also of students, journalists

and interested individuals. It would be worth translating into English and making available to a wider circle of readers, particularly those who deal with the policies of higher education, the democratisation of society, transparency of financing and ensuring equal and just access to higher education in Europe and elsewhere. The book could be used as a kind of guide for the writing of similar works in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe.