Philosophers on Chairs. How Did the Organizational Structure of Russian University Bias post-Soviet Philosophy?

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Introduction

Philosophy played a very specific role in the Soviet system of science and education. It was the major discipline responsible for the ideological support of the political regime. What happened to philosophy after the collapse of the Soviet Union? According to statistics, the number of universities in the Russian Federation that offer educational programs in the field of philosophy increased almost 10 times in the post-Soviet period: from 5 to 47. How can we explain this growth and what does it mean in terms of the dynamics of disciplines within the scope of humanities? The goal of this article is to answer this question intentionally leaving ideological issues aside and focusing on the organizational aspect. The thesis We claim that the organizational structure of philosophy departments, the so-called "chair system," typical for Soviet universities, is helping philosophers today to overcome the crisis of professional self-identification after the Soviet philosophy lost its credit. But the chair system that divided knowledge into sub-disciplines has also led to the development of academic standards that differ from internationally accepted ones.

Chair System at a Soviet University

A center of philosophical education at a Russian university is a so-called 'philosophy faculty' (fakultet), or department. Like other departments of post-Soviet universities, philosophy departments are organised around so-called chairs (kafedra). This chair systems, going back to the 19 century, originated from the German academic tradition. A German chair (Lehrstuhl) is an organizational unit within which all non-professorial faculty and some (if any) staff members are subordinate to a single person occupying a regular professorial position. Such a unit has two models: the chair model and the department model. The latter does not have a position of leading professor, and personnel is employed directly with the department.

Soviet higher educational system retained hierarchical elements of the chair system but the number of permanent academic position per chair was substantially expanded. In this respect, a chair at a Russian university can be compared to a department. Just like in a department, the staff of a chair is occupied with one subject area. Usually one department unites several chairs. From this point of view, a department at a Russian university looks like a school or department at a Western university, e.g., school of law, department of social sciences, etc.

Philosophical education doesn't have a long history in Russia. It was introduced in 1940, during Stalin's era. Among the universities of the Russian Empire, only Moscow University did for a short time — from 1906 through 1913 — offer a special educational program in philosophy, though philosophy or philosophy-related disciplines, such as logic and psychology, were compulsory for all the students of the empire. For this purpose, philosophy chairs were organized at universities. Specialization in philosophy was only available at the level of postgraduate studies.

In the 1920s, under the Soviet rule, the core of philosophical knowledge changed to match the new ideological style. In the new context, the system of obligatory philosophy courses expanded to cover all programs of higher and post-graduate education. In addition to chairs, philosophy departments were organized at some universities. The first four philosophy departments in the Soviet Union were opened during the 1940s. Two were in Russia, in Moscow and Leningrad, the other two — in Kiev (Ukraine) and in Tbilisi (Georgia). During this time the geography of philosophy as a separate specialization broadened. Two more departments were established: one in Sverdlovsk (now-Ekaterinburg) in 1966, and one in Rostov-on-Don in the 1970s. In the very beginning, the original four philosophy departments had a similar organizational structure. Each of them consisted of about four chairs. As years passed, their number increased. The one at Moscow State University became the biggest: by the end of Soviet times, in 1989, it consisted of 17 chairs; one of the smallest philosophy departments — in Rostov-on-Don — had 8 chairs. The names of chairs in different universities were often identical, though chairs at smaller universities could have multiple specialization. In Rostov-on-Don, for example, there was a chair of logic, ethics, and aesthetics, while at Moscow State University there was a separate chair for each of those subjects.

New Disciplines and Academic Entrepreneurs

The Perestroika and the post-Soviet period brought some changes. We can identify two strategies of organizational development common for philosophy departments during the time: 1) renaming (or rebranding) of the chairs; 2) clustering and removal of some social disciplines further from philosophy. Let's describe them in more detail.

1) The crisis of legitimacy of Soviet philosophy in the post-Soviet period led to renaming of chairs, which didn't bring with it any changes in faculty or in hiring policy. Thus, for example, the chair of dialectic materialism at the philosophy department of Moscow State University became first the chair of 'theoretical philosophy,' and then the chair of 'ontology and theory of knowledge'; the chair of historical materialism 'switched' to 'social philosophy'; and the chair of the history and theory of a scientific atheism turned into the chair of 'religious studies'. The only chair removed was that of the history of Marxism-Leninism.

2) Soviet interpretation of philosophical education promoted the idea of academic differentiation in social sciences. The first discipline that was separated from philosophy was psychology. The original chair of psychology at Moscow University was transformed into a subdivision in 1947; then, in 1966, it became an independent department (fakultet). Some of the chairs created in the late 1960s–1970s were later transformed into blocks of 'sociological chairs' that became a separate sociology subdivision in 1984 (and in 1989 it was transformed into the department of sociology); in 2008, the chairs related to political science were eventually transformed into a separate department too. Disciplines like sociology, political science and psychology emerged from former Soviet chairs. For this reason they do not completely match their Western equivalents.

However, sociology and political science are not the only disciplines that hardly correspond to Western equivalents. The most evident examples of such disciplines at post-Soviet universities are 'religiovedenie' (religious studies) and 'kulturologia' (cultural studies). 'Religiovedenie' as a post-Soviet discipline can be traced back to 'scientific atheism' that was taught in the late Soviet times as part of the official anticlerical policy. The emergence of 'kulturologia' in the 1990s is an example of philosophy transforming into a new discipline.

The fall of ideological control combined with lack of financial support from the state turned many faculty members into a sort of academic entrepreneurs. Student body in Russia split into two groups: state-funded students (constituting a majority) and self-funded students. Academic institutions were forced to compete for benefits from the government while trying to balance the budget by mixing two types of students. The problem is that self-funded students are often the ones who scored lower during admission exams (which were some years ago substituted with the Unified State Exam). They are usually not very successful at studying as well. In other words, this academic entrepreneurship is — in most cases — not about competition based on research and teaching excellence but about getting access to government resources and attracting more students who can pay.

Lack of freedom from ideological clichés on the one hand, and lower academic standards on the other, have placed bureaucratic issues related to educational standards in the center. The chair system has played a substantial role in this process. A special organization based at Moscow State University — a teaching methodology unit — was set to develop educational standards. They served as a benchmark for all the related chairs or programs in most Russian universities. The specific history of the discipline and the big role of bureaucracy have locked these programs to national academic labor market.

Chairs: with or without?

Western-oriented universities that were opened after 1991, such as The European University at Saint Petersburg (1994) or Moscow School of Social and Economic Science (1995), were avoiding opening educational programs in philosophy for a long time. The two philosophical departments established at these new universities declare themselves as providers of international educational standards. Russian State University for the Humanities opened its philosophy department in 1992, National Research University — Higher School of Economics — in 2007. Structurally they are very similar to the already existing philosophy departments at other Russian universities. Both of them have chairs of ontology and theory of knowledge, social philosophy, and history of philosophy. These cases illustrate institutional inertia that prevents the disciplines from internationalization. However, the institutional setting of Soviet and post-Soviet traditions weaken with time, and new institutional reforms in education are being introduced. We can, for example, see radical changes in case of HSE philosophy department. During the recent reorganization, all the chairs were united into one school of philosophy that became a part of the faculty of humanities. This can be seen as a trend towards successful internationalization.

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