

Political ontology – a foundation of critical higher education research

Jakub Krzeski¹, Krystian Szadkowski²

¹Faculty of Philosophy and Social Sciences, Nicolaus Copernicus University, j.krzeski@umk.pl

²Scholarly Communication Research Group, Adam Mickiewicz University, krysszad@amu.edu.pl

Abstract

Following the ontological turn in higher education research, this paper argues that the critique is inevitably entangled with the ontological dimension. How we conceive the being and what we deem ontologically primary regulate how we dissect and deconstruct the present state of things, as well as determine the kind of the alternative to building up which our critical efforts are invested. In this context, political ontology is presented as a type of reflection that uncovers hidden and ideological presuppositions about university while establishing ground on which critique can operate. When narrowed down to the analysis of higher education, political ontology can be deployed to investigate the two hegemonic modes of articulation of being within the sector. On the one hand, it interrogates ontological assumptions about the primacy of the individual, underpinning the ongoing market expansion. On the other, it examines assumptions regarding totality that encompasses individual parts, which underpins the coordinating role of the state vis-a-vis university sector. Those two modes of articulation of being have to be put into the context of the current historical conjuncture. One, in which productive dialectics between the market and the state exhaust its powers due to the acceleration of capitalist socialization of higher education. By exposing this deadlock political ontology is able to introduce an alternative mode of articulation that transcends the private and the public. Such an articulation is founded on the common. The common rejects the hegemony of those two ontological models, not only at the theoretical level but also in their material basis, within the many past and contemporary practices of teaching/learning and knowledge production, that due to their relational and collective nature, refuse to be completely subsumed under the private/public dichotomy.

As such the developed argument relates to think pieces by Dr Janja Komljenovic and Professor Alison Phipps and, to a certain extent, connects ideas contained in them. Under the current predicament, the common, for which political ontology makes its case, can be observed primarily through its corrupted forms. Instead of increasing the collective and productive power of those involved in higher education, it all too often is instrumentally used to propel competition, focus on performance and acceleration. However, recognizing the common as an ontological ground allows us, in turn, to better grasp what fuels higher education industry and markets in the first place, as well as offers a tangible meaning to abundance, covered by the myth of scarcity.

Keywords

political ontology, critique, crisis, the common