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## **Crises in Education: Reflections on the Conflation of Education with Economics and Politics**

**ABSTRACT:** In his reflection on the global crisis in education, the author points to the growing conflation of education with economics and politics and considers a generally neglected dimension of worldwide educational crisis, namely, the persistent lack of appreciation of education as a significant end in itself. He illustrates his point on three national cases - the United States, Israel and Poland – and shows the current crisis as a general attack using the life of the mind and the role it plays in the life of society and individuals.

**KEYWORDS:** crisis, education, globalization, Israel, Poland, politics, universities, U.S.A.

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Jak cytować:	Goldfarb, J. (2013). Crises in Education: Reflections on the Conflation of Education with Economics and Politics. <i>Forum Oświatowe</i> , 3(50), 153-161. Pobrane z: <a href="http://forumoswiatowe.pl/index.php/czasopismo/article/view/164">http://forumoswiatowe.pl/index.php/czasopismo/article/view/164</a>
How to cite:	Goldfarb, J. (2013). Crises in Education: Reflections on the Conflation of Education with Economics and Politics. <i>Forum Oświatowe</i> , 3(50), 153-161. Retrieved from <a href="http://forumoswiatowe.pl/index.php/czasopismo/article/view/164">http://forumoswiatowe.pl/index.php/czasopismo/article/view/164</a>

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There is a profound global crisis in education today that has not been generally recognized. Beyond the problems of teaching the next generation to adequately read and write, do math, critically think, and understand and appreciate the cultural and political inheritance (as it is locally defined), beyond the challenge of defining and achieving minimal and optimal learning outcomes, and beyond the crisis in funding education and linking education to the labor market, there is the lack of appreciation of education as a significant end in itself. There is a general attack on the life of the mind and the role it plays in the life of society and individuals in the society. There is a growing conflation of education with economics and politics, a view of education as an instrument of politics or economics. Consider three such cases.

#### A PROBLEM IN AMERICA

Higher education in the U.S is in crisis. No doubt about it. But I worry that we are in real danger of throwing out the baby with the bathwater.

The crisis has many dimensions, not the least of which is economic: ever increasing tuition, diminishing job prospects, exploding student debt. Calls for accountability are understandable. Moves for measures of well-specified educational outcomes seem to make sense. But, I fear, proposed solutions threaten to make matters worse and endanger the institutions of higher learning in America.

I worry about magical solutions: MOOCs (Massive Open On-line Courses), substituting television for face to face inquiry, even though using the Web to strengthen educational practices makes sense to me. Because real interaction, with careful participation of students and faculty, is a goal in this regard, I don't see how online education is less expensive. I know that proper online teaching involves intense, time consuming labor, with extended written exchange between students and faculty.

I am even more concerned about attempts to precisely measure educational outcomes, seeking to clearly specify course and program goals. This hits close to home. At the New School, at a recent faculty meeting, a presentation on our "Shared Capacity Initiative" project stimulated a brief, but intense, controversy. What are the common capacities we wish to assure all students, aspiring musicians, artists and social scientists, liberal arts majors in the humanities and fashion design students? I thought to myself the three "r's"—readin, 'ritin and 'rithmetic. Beyond my private joke: many, including me, worry that attempts to establish educational goals with measures of

learning outcomes lead to a kind of deadly educational uncertainty principle, as with much educational testing. The move to measure educational outcomes may change and kill the education that is the object of measurement. This hits close to home, but it is a broad and general problem in the U.S. and far beyond. Even political leaders that I strongly support, i.e. specifically Barack Obama, are on the wrong side of the educational challenge, as they confuse educational progress with better testing results and improved job prospects.

My approach has been to engage in a private resistance. When told that in my undergraduate course I was required to clearly specify my educational objectives to the students in the syllabus, I included the following:

The objective of this class follows the insights of Michael Oakeshott, the great (conservative) philosopher, as he illuminated the problem of education and the liberal arts. He observed that 'Education in its most general significance may be recognized as a specific transaction which may go on between generations of human beings in which newcomers to the scene are initiated into the world they are to inhabit.' He went on to explain that a liberal education involves 'the invitation to disentangle oneself for a time, from the urgencies of the here and now and to listen to the conversation in which human beings forever seek to understand themselves' (Fuller, 1990). Our object in this seminar, thus, is to listen to the conversation as it has been developing around the ideas of Alexis de Tocqueville's classic *Democracy in America*, as we try to understand the social condition and the problem of democracy in America, then and now.

I happily complied with the requirement, but resisted what I take to be its narrow intent. I suspect at the New School and American universities more generally, now is the time to move from private jokes and mocking compliance about problematic rules, to serious public discussion about the purposes of higher education beyond vocational training. Involved is the integrity of the educational process and the challenge that those who actually do not know much about what is involved are beginning to control and constrain those who do, educators.

#### ON EDUCATIONAL FREEDOM IN ISRAEL AND POLAND

Combine the attempt to measure educational quality through quantitative means with deep political conflict, as in Israel, and matters get much worse. In the title of this section of my paper, I am mimicking the title of my second book, *On Cultural Freedom: An Exploration of Public Life in Poland and America*, as I am imagining writing a second volume, a case study focusing the theory from my book written thirty years ago on a particular cultural domain today. My thought experiment is motivated by a concern for my intellectual home, the university, in the U.S., Israel, Poland, and beyond.

While the immediate stimulus for these reflections is an attack upon the Politics and Government Department at Ben Gurion University in Israel (see <http://www.deliberatelyconsidered.com/2012/09/academic-freedom-attacked-in-israel/>), I think the crudeness of the attack is matched by more subtle, but also powerful, challenges to academic freedom and quality quite apparent in the United States, and elsewhere.

The attack on the academic freedom of the politics and government of Ben Gurion University is straightforward political repression. There is an attempt on the part of the Israeli right to cleanse the Israeli academy of what it takes to be “anti-Zionism.” An NGO, sometimes labeled as Fascist, *Im Tirtzu*, has led the charge. Right-wing politicians have used institutional means to attempt a purge.

An international review panel recommended reforms to broaden the intellectual profile of Ben Gurion University’s Department of Politics and Government (something I, for one, am not sure is a good idea) and the recommendations have been creatively misinterpreted by the Israeli Council for Higher Education (CHE), a government-appointed body charged with the supervision and financing of universities and colleges in Israel, to justify closing the department down. The independence of the university is under direct political assault. (<http://isacademyunderattack.wordpress.com/the-department-of-politics-and-government-at-ben-gurion-university-under-threat-of-closure-2>).

This is classic case of political repression of cultural freedom, reminiscent of the fate of Socrates. The Israeli government, right-wing politicians, and a segment of civil society are concerned that the Ben Gurion professors are corrupting the young, turning them away from patriotic feeling and commitment. A nice irony: the president of the university, Professor Rivka Carmi, is a leading critic of the left-wing professors of her institution, but has forcefully defended them:

The sub-committee’s decision was reached without any factual base to back it up; it is unreasonable and disproportional and most notably, it does not in any way reflect the opinion of the international committee which oversaw the process. We therefore wonder what is actually behind this decision. (<http://www.deliberatelyconsidered.com/2012/09/on-cultural-freedom-an-exploration-of-academic-life-in-israel-pakistan-and-the-u-s>)

A critic of the left, but also a critic of political repression, Professor Carmi is a defender of academic freedom. I would interview her for my imagined book. I would like to know in detail her reasoning and explore her judgment. I suspect a fundamental commitment to the goods of scholarship and teaching as a priority over politics and the ethos of the state would be the basis of both of her critical moves. I imagine her commitment would be to cultural freedom.

From my point of view, as the author of *On Cultural Freedom*, Carmi’s commitment to academic freedom can be understood in terms of three different, though related, conversations that are threatened by the actions of the Israeli state apparatus: the conversation the political scientists and theorists in the department have with

their predecessors, the conversation they have with their peers, fellow researchers and thinkers in Israel and around the world, and the conversation they have with their students. Ideology and the interest of the state are disrupting these conversations.

I explained cultural freedom in terms of the conversations in *On Cultural Freedom* (formulated a bit differently). My point now, informed by my earlier inquiry, is that academic freedom exists if such conversations are ongoing and vibrant. It is under attack when forces interrupt them. Clearly in Israel this is happening. Even if the Department of Politics and Government is not closed down, there is an escalating demand for ideological correctness from researchers and teachers, and students learn from this. Politics is challenging academic life. I believe comparisons to McCarthyism are understatements.

Young researchers will wonder whether they will get a job if their work crosses a political line. Established professors will think twice about questioning political orthodoxy, fearing for the secure positions of their departments and colleagues, and for themselves. Closing the department at Ben Gurion will close the Israeli political mind.

The academy and Israeli democracy will then suffer a serious blow. This is extremely worrying for those concerned about the independence of scholarship and education, and for democracy in Israel. Academic quality and state-enforced political correctness don't mix, and informed decision without academic quality is unlikely in a modern democracy. In my imagined book, I would spell this out.

But I would want to underscore that the threat to academic freedom does not only come in the form of overt political repression. This was a key point of *On Cultural Freedom*. I showed how, despite overt political repression, the three conversations were sustained, with varying degrees of success, around the old Soviet bloc. And I showed how the repressive aspects of the market sometimes worked to kill cultural freedom just as effectively as a powerful state: analyzing how this worked specifically in the cases of theater in Poland and America. In my imagined book, I would explore this insight, concerned as I am by the escalating penetration of market and corporate logic into university practice in America. In my new book, I would examine the case of the attempted firing of Theresa Sullivan as President of the University of Virginia (<http://chronicle.com/article/Teresa-Sullivan-Resigns-From/132417>). I would also explore how both political and economic interference in academic life affects the prospects of a new generation supporting the life of the mind in universities around the world, including Poland.

### *On Cultural Freedom and the Free University in Poland*

I think the controversies surrounding Zygmunt Bauman demonstrate the nature of the problem in Poland. It has less to do with Stalinism and more to do with the state of Poland's democracy and, crucially, the state of higher education, free research, and teaching. Here is how I understand the situation and how I evaluate its significance.

On June 22<sup>nd</sup> of this year, in the city of Wroclaw, a lecture by Zygmunt Bauman was aggressively disrupted by a group of neo-fascists (Chmielewski, 2013). When I first

read about this, I was concerned, but not overly so. The extreme right has a persistent, visible, but ultimately, marginal presence on the Polish political scene, I assured myself. As a video of the event<sup>1</sup> reveals, there is the other, apparently more significant, Poland that invited and wanted to listen to the distinguished social theorist speak, and cheered when the motley crew of ultra-nationalists and soccer hooligans were escorted from the lecture hall. While xenophobia and neo-fascism are threats in Eastern and Central Europe, I was pretty confident that in Poland, they were being held at bay.

But, after a recent visit to Wrocław in the summer of 2013, I realize that I may have been wrong. While there, I had the occasion to talk about the “Bauman Affair” with some friends and colleagues. A highlight was around a dinner, though not at a kitchen table (Goldfarb, 2007). I am now deeply concerned not only about the event itself, but also about the political and cultural direction of Poland.

We had a lovely dinner at Hana Cervinkova and Lotar Rasinski’s home. Among the other guests were my colleagues at The New School’s Democracy and Diversity Institute, Elzbieta Matynia, Susan Yelavich, Dick Bernstein and Carol Bernstein, and Juliet Golden, a Wrocław resident and superb observer of the material life of the city, and her husband, a distinguished craftsman, restorer of among other things of the Jewish cemetery in Wrocław. The Wrocław *Solidarność* hero, Władysław Frasyniuk, and his wife joined us, as did Sylvie Kauffmann, the former editor of *Le Monde*, who reported extensively around the old Soviet bloc in the 80s and 90s, and now returns as the wife of the French ambassador. The dinner followed a public discussion between him and her. Also joining us was Adam Chmielewski, who as the Chair of the Department of Social and Political Philosophy of the University of Wrocław, was one of the co-sponsors of the Bauman lecture. All were concerned about the Bauman affair, and understood that at issue was not only the talk of a challenging professor. My concern is rather straightforward. It has less to do with the quality of the extreme right, reprehensible as it is, more to do with its relationship with the less extremist mainstream and with the looming threat of confusing academics with politics. Education and research as the primary goals of the academy are being overlooked.

While extremists are indeed at the margins of Polish public opinion, they are becoming more and more effective in making themselves visible to the general public and becoming more acceptable. Politicians are coming to accept the extremists’ definitions of controversies and trying to take advantage of their impact, and the media, many public intellectuals and academics are following their framing of events, or at least not forcefully opposing these frames.

Thus, Bauman’s lecture was framed as a scandalous talk by a Stalinist, rather than as a presentation by a distinguished, highly creative social theorist. The disruption was considered as a problem of the legacies of communism and not as a problem concerning the fate of academic freedom in an open society.

Should a Stalinist speak became the question. The quality of Bauman’s work, the importance of his diagnoses of the problems of our times, was put aside. The debate became how the politics of a young man, of a Jewish communist, should be judged, and whether its purported influence needed to be controlled. The fact that Bauman

was hounded out of Poland in the wake of an anti-Zionist wave (in that case purported anti-Zionism was really a thin guise for anti-Semitism) was not discussed. The problem of the attempt to silence a critical opinion was not the issue. Rather, the occasion of Bauman's lecture and its disruption was used to call for the long delayed lustration, a cleansing of communist influence from Polish public life. There was a smell of anti-Semitism in the air. It seemed that at issue is as well to rid Polish public life of Jewish influence. But perhaps that is my paranoia.

The major opposition party, *PiS* (Law and Justice) seems to be supportive of the actions of the extreme right, while the ruling party, *PO* (Civic Platform), seems to be reluctant to too forcefully denounce the right. And intellectuals and professors, even those who privately find the attacks on academic freedom repugnant, are reluctant to speak up. *PiS* accepts the extremists definition of the situation. *PO* is reluctant to oppose it, as are many others. Elsewhere, there is not much active direct support of neo-fascists, I trust, even among many in *PiS*. Yet, indirect support and the absence of strong opposition is a serious problem.

I have a playful unprofessional theory about extremism in contemporary politics. Somewhere around 20% of the citizens of just about all contemporary democracies support extreme anti-democratic, xenophobic and racist politics. If these people had their way, democracy would be fundamentally challenged. (Close to home I think of the Tea Party or at least the birthers and the clear Obama haters). The fate of democracy lies in what is done with this margin of the population. Encourage, tolerate or collaborate with this fringe, and a decent democratic politics is undermined or even lost. This is now happening in Hungary. It may happen in Poland.

A major party is in bed with the extremists. The ruling party is not forcefully opposing them. And there does not seem to be a broad civic response against this situation. It is the silence of the centrists, of the "moderates," that I find deafening. I believe, but I may be mistaken, that those on the left are speaking up, but I am not sure that they are being heard, isolated, as they are. This is the way I understand the politics of the controversy surrounding the Bauman affair. Of course, others can disagree. Perhaps the link between *PiS* and the extremist is not as close as I suspect. Perhaps my concern about anti-Semitism is overdrawn. But one thing is certain. A distinguished scholar was silenced because of his past controversial political actions, and those who denounced him and those who defended him focused their attention on his politics and not on the fact that ideals of higher education were compromised. In Israel, there is an aggressive right wing politics that is committed to attack professors on political grounds. In the U.S., bureaucratic decision-making and concern about vocational training and economic performance are at the center of the discussion about education. Poland apparently combines these two trends.

To end on an oblique note of deep concern: I think I see a kind of post-communist treason of intellectuals. It is particularly disturbing, and uncharacteristic of what I have long admired in Polish cultural life. While in Poland, I heard about the calculations of academics surrounding the Bauman affair. There is ambivalence about one of the most distinguished men of Polish letters, supporting him may be dangerous:

to do so might compromise one's career or lead to a weakening institutional support. Suffice it to say that I admire and support my Polish friends who invited, listened and critically and deliberately considered Bauman's talk, whether or not they agree with him (as by the way, I don't on many issues of form and substance). I am disturbed by the problems my friends and colleagues face. There is a clear and present danger, and it is not the specter of communism.

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#### KRYZYSY W EDUKACJI.

#### REFLEKSJA NAD SPLOTEM EDUKACJI Z EKONOMIĄ I POLITYKĄ

**ABSTRAKT:** W swych rozważaniach nad globalnym kryzysem edukacji, autor koncentruje się nad coraz ściślejszym splotem między edukacją a ekonomią i polityką, skupiając się przy tym na często pomijanym wymiarze światowego kryzysu edukacyjnego, a mianowicie na braku uznania edukacji za cel znaczący sam w sobie. Ilustrując swoje przemyślenia trzema przykładami z USA, Izraela i Polski, autor naświetla obecny kryzys jako ogólny atak na życie intelektualne oraz ukazuje jego rolę w życiu jednostek i społeczeństwa.

**SŁOWA KLUCZOWE:** edukacja, globalizacja, Izrael, kryzys, polityka, Polska, uniwersytety, USA.





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1. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ubF-1axqPPw>
  2. Published in Polish as: *Akademie nienawiści*. *Odra*, 2013, 9, 2–8 [editor's note].
  3. Published in Polish as: *O demokracji w Ameryce* (Marcin Król, Trans.). Warszawa: PIW, 1976 [editor's note].
  4. Published in Polish as: *Polityka Rzeczy Małych. Siła Bezsilnych w Mrocznych Czasach*. Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Naukowe DSW, 2012 [editor's note].