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**Universities at the Crossroads:
New Meanings and Growth Points in the Digital Reality:
Book Review of:**

Osmuk, L.A. (Ed.). (2022). *L'université et la ville: dialogue dans le discours post-industriel sur l'exemple de la Russie et de la France: monographie*. Novosibirsk: NSTU Publ.

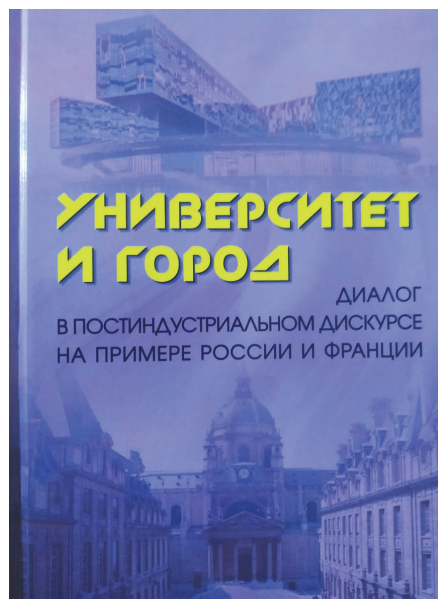
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The role of universities in the social and political life of many countries of the world has increased significantly in recent years. Ronald Barnett, a recognized expert in the field of higher education, Emeritus Professor at the Institute of Education, University of London (Great Britain), noting the *supercomplexity* (italicized by the author. – E.Kh.) of the modern world, exhorts universities to think about themselves, “...the university should reflect on itself so as to understand its own inner resources for educating for a world of persistent uncertainty, both in its systems and in what it is to be human amid radical instability...” and to use their resources “to reach out to the wider world in all manner of ways to help to develop the public sphere” (Barnett, 2019, p. 287).

In 2022, there appeared a solid monograph on rethinking the role of universities and their interaction with the city, its inhabitants and urban infrastructure. Among the authors were scientists from the universities of Tomsk (NRTSU, TSUAB), Novosibirsk (NSTU, NSU), Moscow (HSE), Siberian Branch of the Russian Academy of Sciences (IEIE SBRAS), and France (Paul Valéry University of Montpellier).



In Russian and foreign historiography, it is the first work of this kind: with a comparative analysis of the cases of the Russian Federation and France in the context of the post-industrial discourse stated in the title. Moreover, the publication is bilingual: first comes the Russian text, then (from p. 293) the French version of the book begins.

The collective monograph (the review refers to the Russian version; the French part is completely analogous) consists of six chapters. The main content is preceded by the introductory words of Academician of the Russian Academy of Sciences A.V. Torkunov, Rector of MGIMO; I.V. Manuylov, Deputy Governor of the Novosibirsk Region, Professor A.A. Bataev, Rector of NSTU; L.M. Ogorodova, Corresponding Member of the Russian Academy of Sciences and Deputy Governor of the Tomsk Region for the Scientific and Educational Complex and Digital Transformation, and Professor E.V. Galazhinsky, Rector of the National Research Tomsk State University. The foreword was written by Doctor of Sociological Sciences L.A. Osmuk, who was also a science editor.

The monograph touches upon such topics as the modification of the modern university and the city, the historical roots of their interaction, the current trends in the development of the higher education system in the context of the urgent needs of the state and society, the change in the meaning and concept of the university city, their interaction within the ‘triple helix’, the processes of studentization and internationalization and others.

The authors start the story from the historical background. In particular, they draw attention to the fact that “the history of European universities (it is with their experience that the historical review begins. – *E.Kh.*) is inextricably linked with the city as a sociocultural and economic phenomenon, which largely determines the development vector of European civilization as a whole” (p. 15). If we talk about the French experience, then, for example, the University of Paris (*Université de Paris*) “immediately began to develop as part of the city, defining its cultural life” (p. 20).

In this regard, we should note an important detail: in recent years, the book of the French sociologist A. Lefebvre *The Right to the City* has begun to arouse increased interest among specialists. This book, published by symbolic coincidence during the student riots in France in 1968, outlined the ideas of decentralization of government in favor of cities and the right of citizens to make their own decisions about the use of urban space.

In the reviewed collective monograph, attention is also paid to the events of 1968. It is noted, in particular, that “after the turbulent events of the youth revolution of 1968, the University of Bordeaux underwent reorganization, like many universities in France” (p. 145). Moreover, the student revolution of 1968 confirmed that the universities and students of Paris are closely connected with the city and determine its socio-political development. It is also noteworthy that the students of France are still quite restless and active, and are a significant political force (however, at the same time, only individual universities in France stand out for their political activity)” (p. 27).

But why should Lefebvre's ideas and the experience of student protests and attempts at self-government have become in demand again in our day? The point here is that, in 2020, with the onset of the pandemic (which is rightly analyzed in different contexts in the collective monograph), the processes of deglobalization and increased regionalization against the backdrop of a sharp decrease in the mobility of people and transport links have emerged, bringing to the fore in discussions about the city the opportunities and needs of townspeople to influence current events. A. Lefebvre believed that "each type of society and mode of production presuppose the formation of a special type of city, producing a special type of physical and social space. A change in the mode of production must inevitably lead to a change in space" (Vershina, 2018, p. 51). In other words, it was about citizens as the main participants in social transformations, in which universities have been actively involved in recent years.

In the face of the pandemic, as can be seen, the actor role of cities has increased. With the onset of the pandemic, some cities began to exercise their 'right to the city' without prior permission (cases of the UK, USA, South Korea, Japan and others), taking a leading role in developing or promoting policy responses to the crisis, which were then expanded at the national level.

For universities, the future of internationalization has become an issue of increased complexity in the context of the pandemic: the decline in mobility, unprecedented in recent history, has predictably hit the ability of universities to attract international students. The authors of the monograph note that "although the coronavirus pandemic in 2019–2021 has made its own adjustments, Russian universities have continued to focus on attracting foreign students as one of the resources for the development of universities, along the way contributing to the expansion of the "soft power" of the state, which so far largely remains on second on the Russian agenda. Cities also join the competition for foreign students" (p. 39).

In this regard, it makes one wonder, for example, how foreign students choose a city for study, what they focus on in the first or second place, etc. The authors conducted a series of studies using quantitative and qualitative methods. The surveys for the period of 2018–20 have shown that "the mechanism for choosing a place of study is closely related to the reputation of the university itself, the activity of recruiting agencies and the monitoring of the virtual information environment. The nature of representation in the information environment of both the university and the city in which it is located becomes decisive for the decision made by the applicants. For those surveyed in both countries, the universal starting criteria for choosing a city were: (1) safety, cultural diversity and tolerance of the social environment; (2) aesthetic appeal of the city and available attractions in it; (3) good external and internal transport systems; (4) high concentration of foreign students in the city; and (5) open and accessible communication environment (p. 137).

The authors also identified specific criteria that contribute to internationalization both in the Russian Federation and France: For French cities, according to the surveys, these are "the mobility within the country, accessibility of other cities and their cultural potential and, accordingly, availability of an effective intercity transport system. For Siberian cities, this is the availability of education and

living” (p. 138). The climatic factor appeared as an ‘optional’ criterion in the responses. Moreover, if, predictably, “in relation to French cities this factor works as an attractive one, especially in the southern provinces, then in relation to Siberian cities ‘unusual weather conditions’, despite their perception by individual students as a ‘challenge’, rather have a negative impact along with the ‘away-from-Moscow’ factor (p. 138). The problem often lies not so much in the long cold season as in the lack of accessible ‘non-climatic’ infrastructure (indoor sports and entertainment facilities, winter gardens, warm stops, etc.)” (p. 138). It seems that this moment should be especially taken into account by the city authorities, given that the trend towards the internationalization and development of human capital in general is one of the conditions for the successful development of all spheres of life and the growth of the attractiveness of the city and the country.

However, as regards new trends in internationalization, the main one among them is the active inclusion of non-capital cities in the process: “It is easier for a small ‘university’ city to accept internationalization, as a result, in a million city, the process becomes spontaneous. If today France is attractive to students of Siberian universities, then French students are not ready to study in Siberia, but are ready to participate in joint (network) projects” (p. 140).

The monograph also touches upon the theme of a ‘smart city’, which is popular in modern literature. The authors quite rightly note that the pandemic has increased the demand for the introduction of ‘smart technologies’, for example, the ‘digital twin of the city’ can allow “effectively modelling the development of the urban area, managing all systems in accordance with the adopted development strategy, and seeing in advance the consequences of the proposed changes” (p. 199). In Tomsk, for example, it is planned to “create a digital prototype of one of the city blocks, with the help of which it will be possible to predict the development of the entire city or its individual systems” (p. 199).

Among other important topics of the collective research are (1) identification of the university’s role in generating traditions and shaping the socio-cultural space of the city; (2) academic toponymy: the trace of the university on the map of the city; (3) practices of forming traditions: historical and modern perspectives; (4) creation of a comfortable and accessible environment in the university city; (5) urban development of the university city (the case of Tomsk); (6) strategic interaction between the city and the university in the construction of the campus of the future; (7) contributions of universities to the sustainable development agenda, and (8) the best global and domestic practices of ‘sustainable’ universities.

Undoubtedly, of theoretical and practical interest is the chapter of the monograph devoted to the night life of students. The authors note that “‘night’ is one of the important components of the economic and social development of a modern city. The term ‘nightlife’ itself is a collective concept for a number of specific practices and services that are in demand and popular from evening to early morning.” It is referred to entertainment practices, including visiting cafes, museums, and theatres, or shopping at night and meeting friends (p. 247). In many countries, these night services are considered as a very significant factor in the growth of the urban economy an indicator of a comfortable urban environment.

It is noteworthy that, as is the case when nightlife is described, in some other sections of the book, the climatic factor is also mentioned. Cold Siberian winters reduce night-time mobility of students, although “even in the summer, the predominance of small clubs and cafes and the segmentation of university campuses are obstacles to open-air intercollegiate events, as well as to student communication” (p. 284). As a call for borrowing experience, the thesis is put forward that “managers of Western universities widely use the nightlife quality factor as one of the means of attracting applicants to the university... Nightlife... is part of the advertising information that many universities supply to applicants and enrolled students” (pp. 251–252).

It should be noted that the connection between the university and the city is especially noticeable in the example of nightlife; however, the researchers draw attention to the fact that the entertainment sector in a post-industrial, consumer-oriented city affects not only issues of economic development and creativity but also ‘law and order’ and ‘social control’. The night economy requires a special management model that provides for the coordination of the interests of various actors, including city authorities, police, nightclub owners, and other stakeholders (Chatterton, 2002).

The authors of the monograph also acknowledge that the pandemic has accelerated the onset of the digital era, in which “a post-industrial city cannot exist without universities that determine its modern look. The more universities (higher educational institutions) there are in the city, the more they determine the content of the urban socio-cultural space. Their presence determines the intellectual potential of human capital, the content of communications and information flows, the system of social values, the attitude to cultural traditions and the ritualization of social life” (p. 61).

In other words, we are talking about a pandemic as a catalyst for the Fourth Industrial Revolution and the emergence of Universities 4.0, which have the resources and competencies to solve advanced tasks that are unrealizable at industrial enterprises. Such tasks are problems, challenges for the society as a whole.

That is to say, the point at issue is that that universities, in the new logic, take on the function of creating so-called *social* (emphasized by the author. – *E.Kh.*) innovations in response to emerging challenges. Such innovations can be understood as new models, services and products that simultaneously meet social needs and are aimed at solving global problems. The expected unprecedented surge in technical, industrial and social innovations calls into question the adaptive capacity of individuals and institutions as for threats to human identity, social stability and economic security. Thus, universities are on the cusp of developing strategies that will help graduates increase their adaptive capacity and successfully respond to any emerging changes.

Universities 4.0 are focused on the philosophy of long-term (lifelong) learning and, in this case, the online mode tested during the pandemic can be very helpful in solving this problem. Distance learning is in high demand among working professionals, young mothers, students from other educational institutions, persons with disabilities, military personnel, and residents of remote regions. The specifics and advantages of distance education make it possible to consider it as one of

the key resources that provide an opportunity to compensate for social inequality” (Tikhomirova, 2014, p. 4).

In the logic of University 4.0, for example, the strategy of Tomsk State University is built, which in 2022, as part of the Priority 2030 program, defined the following four innovative “frameworks”: “the establishment of a breakthrough university”, “transdisciplinarity”, “ecosystem”, and “sustainable development of society and living standards”.¹ The last point is aimed at the implementation, among other things, of the Sustainable Development Goals, which, according to the authors of the monograph, are “not only in the performance of educational activities, the upbringing and development of citizens throughout their lives, the transmission and popularization of the ideology of sustainable development.” Among other things, this applies to the tasks of innovative and inventive activities, the implementation of which requires the introduction of new technical solutions in the economic activities of enterprises and organizations, urban economy and business sectors. Universities and research institutions dominate the pursuit of basic research that has long-term economic returns” (p. 204).

The authors come to an extremely important conclusion: “a unique situation has developed when the life of university communities has been under even greater influence of informatization, digitalization and visualization. A wide range of problems that arose in the context of sudden and forced self-isolation were discussed in the social networks and mass media: the quality of distance education, the material and technical equipment of universities, social inequality among students, etc.” (p. 290).

As comments or wishes for future work, I would like to note the need for a clearer explanation of the comparative analysis of the cases of the Russian Federation and France: what can the experience of these countries give each other and other states, what are the similarities between French and Russian policies in the field of higher education, difficulties and prospects? The answers to these questions are presented in the monograph somewhat implicitly or incompletely. Insufficient attention seems to have been paid to the post-industrial discourse, which is rapidly changing the urban space as well as the role and importance of the university.

The book actually ends with an ellipsis: the authors ask questions about the future of education in connection with the pandemic, the regime of which persists to the present, but has moved to the periphery of international life: humanity has returned, with a few exceptions, to normal life, to learning in classrooms, to high mobility. Therefore, the skepticism reflected in the conclusion did not acquire real features: many international events, including the implementation of academic mobility programs, resumed, the borders of almost all states became open (except for China and some others), students returned to offline learning, resorting to a hybrid format if necessary. However, this return to normal life is also a difficult challenge: many remote work practices left over from the first months of the pandemic require re-

¹ To the Breakthrough University and the Big University of Tomsk. 2022. Retrieved November 23, 2022, from <https://news.tsu.ru/projects/word-to-the-rector/k-universitetu-proryva-i-bolshomu-universitetu-tomska/>

flection, adequate application and development: they can potentially be used by universities for a sharp leap forward, a qualitatively multiple improvement in the learning process in a truly digital era and new technological opportunities.

* * *

The monograph can be useful to all those interested in the problems of higher education, internationalization and interaction between the city and citizens with the university, the formation of an attractive and comfortable environment for living and learning, and the development of high-quality advanced infrastructure. The special value of this collective publication lies in the presentation of the results of empirical field research related to identifying the reasons for students to choose certain cities and countries for study, their ideas about the image of the ‘desired tomorrow’ in the context of the steadily increasing role of universities in the socio-political, socio-economic and cultural spheres of life.

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The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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