



ISSN: 2543-6821 (online)

Journal homepage: <http://ceej.wne.uw.edu.pl>

Jerzy Śleszyński

# Reflections on Rationality, Utility, University, Mass Culture and Unsustainable Society

**To cite this article**

Śleszyński, J. (2021). Reflections on Rationality, Utility, University, Mass Culture and Unsustainable Society. Central European Economic Journal, 8(55), 1-11.

**DOI:** 10.2478/ceej-2021-0010

 To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.2478/ceej-2021-0010>



Jerzy Śleszyński 

Faculty of Economic Sciences, University of Warsaw, Poland,  
corresponding author: sleszynski@wne.uw.edu.pl

## Reflections on Rationality, Utility, University, Mass Culture and Unsustainable Society

---

### Abstract

This paper is an expression of gratitude, remembrance and honour the jubilee of Prof. Tomasz Żylicz. As I have been invited to write a paper for a special issue of the CEEJ journal, I sincerely wanted to express regarding my friendship and my research that have been binding me with Tomasz in my more than 40-year work in the Faculty of Economic Sciences, University of Warsaw. Our cooperation was varied and rich including joint articles, research projects and our work for the Ministry of the Environment. In this paper, after friendly acknowledgment, I decided to propose my polemical answer to the paper 'Is reason valued now?' written by Tomasz. The subject of my reply is primarily the rationality in general and in the institution of university in the context of teaching and practicing science, including first of all economics and ecological economics. The method applied in this paper is my descriptive and polemical reference to Tomasz's theses with the analytical use of literature, both classics and very current references. The basic topic of the paper focuses on the fact that modernity continues in an increasingly inertial movement towards mass culture and is dominated by three criteria in this mechanism namely usefulness, non-exclusion and accessibility. I analyse these three fetishes in our dynamic times and with particular emphasis on their negative role in academic education. In my conclusions I categorically state that scientific knowledge and education, perfectly represented by universities, were formed and developed in an alliance with usefulness and utility, but never only thanks to them and never only for them.

### Keywords

education | mass culture | rationality | utility | university

### JEL Codes

A12, A20, B40

---

## 1 Introduction

I think that I understand the positivist intention and educational character of the rhetorical title of your text entitled 'Is reason valued now?' ('Czy rozum jest w cenie?' – in Polish language). You explained that in your intention that it was a close reference to the book published by Erasmus of Rotterdam in 1511 (its Latin title: 'Stultitiae Laus' or 'Moriae Encomium') and quite well-known because of its ironic title: 'In Praise of Folly' (Erasmus of Rotterdam, 1922). I will not argue with the main stream of your paper. I am not going to comment on true and obvious statements with which I agree but praising reason alone is definitely not enough. The devil is hidden in the details and in social phenomena of a more general nature.

I took your paper very seriously and found the topic very important and intriguing. At the beginning

I will respond to selected opinions from your text. I will refer to some questionable phrases and those arguments which are really weakening your statement. After addressing selected issues, I want to propose a broader and less optimistic cognitive perspective of your observations. In my conclusions, I use the example of university as a social institution to present my interpretation of the central problem of our time, which I see in the unreflective acceptance of the expansion of mass culture in science and education. Definitely, not in the eternal struggle between reason and stupidity.

## 2 My Comment on Reason

In the first paragraph of your text, it is learned that logic is the obvious expression of reason. I have two

comments for the sake of reliability. The first: isn't this an aprioristic judgement that you criticise strongly in all your next pages? If this is not, it is necessary to prove that logic is an exemplification of rationality. Second remark: do we have only one logic? It seems that you did not want to choose one logic of different systems generated by formal logic that is familiar with mathematics. So, maybe you meant just logic in action and quite common understanding of wise behaviour? In this case, however, we fall into the abyss of subjective considerations, and it becomes completely sterile to refer to any logic as a measure of sense. People have their own mind, and yet everyone is a monad on matters of his logic and hence misunderstandings and conflicts with others are inevitable.

More important is the caveat that any diligent reduction of reason to logic would be an incredible narrowing of the role of human's reasoning. Many human activities take place against any systematic logic. Saving someone's life at risk, volunteering and painting a picture or defending honour have their own source in morality and emotions or fall within intuitive behaviours. They are the result of a marriage of heart and reason, but formal logic does not appear at all or appears, like the owl of Athena at dusk, as an additional element justifying activities post factum. By the way, the repressive law in the Hammurabi Codex is extremely logical, and yet for centuries our law has been humanised. A coherent legal system is characterised by the internal logic of the law that does not imitate the logic of everyday life and is incomprehensible to the average person and, moreover, does not seek full compliance with the mathematical logic.

### 3 My Comment on Objective Knowledge

A little further, you raise the key issue that people are mixing their worldview as a source of a priori judgements with scientific cognition. I assess the importance of the problem and the numerous threats arising from the confusion in exactly the same way as you did. However, this opinion could be summarised like this: a stupid person knows less, but a wise man is a master of himself and his knowledge. This wise man can hang the subjectivity on the stake and devote himself to objective truth with objective honesty. It is too simple to me. My doubt concerns the existence of

an obvious borderline and the possibility of easy and impartial judgement: what is one hundred per cent scientific approach, and what is certainly a subjective value judgement? My agreement to your opinion that 'mixing' is bad does not lead me to the authoritative statement that we can always define unquestionable criteria (similar to critical questions once asked by the infallible inquisition) to state that: on the left side we have a certain, objective and impartial scientific knowledge, and on the right side are prejudices, superstitions, subjective fantasies.

I was never seduced by post-modernist publications that are trying to prove uncertainty about everything, including also the Pythagoras' pattern. And yet I suggest in my moderation that the absolute and indisputable impartiality and objectivity of modern science is questionable, with a particular view of social sciences. Even uncompromising physics struggles with Heisenberg's uncertainty principle and has its own unpredictable Schroedinger cat. In one textbook, you illustrated the problem of 'regulation takeover' with the possibility of conflict of interest between companies producing competing goods. These goods have their environmental impact and its assessment may depend upon the regulation being implemented. Such conflicts are usually reinforced by the opinions of experts hired to demonstrate the superiority of researched products. Reality can surprise us with numerous scientific opinions that are not compatible with each other. There are few areas of social sciences in which there is one version of scientific truth recognised by all its professionals. In our century, numerous areas of knowledge are dynamically developing such as cosmology, microparticle physics, biochemistry, molecular biology and medicine, genetics. They are constantly bursting with theories, and many of which are rapidly evolving under the influence of empirical research.

I reject pseudo-scientific lies from my discourse because we manage to falsify them and demonstrate their hidden motives or intentional dishonesty. There will be still a lot of research on the table, the results of which differ only because of the different assumptions made. The very concept of abstract thinking and the construction of the model hide the risk of omitting significant causative factors. Such omission can be an expression of a subjective decision, it can result from the researcher's a priori assumptions or it can be stimulated by a very sincere desire to prove what should be proved. Without the influence of deception and stupidity, because I left these shortcomings

outside the scope of my description, the results of the research may differ and be a hidden representation of the individual beliefs of a scientist. It is first and foremost to pay attention to the fact, which your essay did not notice, that hard assumptions (explicit and verifiable) well protect abstract mathematics and most basic research in the natural science domain against a priori judgements, but are not as firm and safe in social sciences. Social sciences are flexible, which means that even without Hegel's 'spirit of history' they follow the dominant views, beliefs, faith and superstitions of their time, consciously and mostly unconsciously (Hegel, 1807).

By the way, nice gentlemen such as Darwin, Freud, Marx, Nietzsche, Bergson, Einstein and Dawkins (Darwin, 1859; Marx, 1887; Bergson, 1907; Nietzsche, 1908; Freud, 1917; Einstein, 1920; Dawkins, 1976) have a guaranteed and permanent place in the annals of science, but not because they were 100% right! All of them pointed to a causal factor that had not been recognised well so far, and which 'behind the curtain' may control: the evolution of organisms, individual behaviour, transformation of social systems, strengthening or weakening of vital forces, the relativity of events described by mechanics, the creation of inherited conditions, etc. The pride of at least a few of these scientists relied on the stubborn claim that they had discovered the source of all mechanisms describing nature, man and/or society. In fact, they only discovered factors that must not be ignored, but hardly anyone of their successors was willing to repeat word for word the dogmatic theses and phrases of their theories. A good example is Erich Fromm, who came from Freudian psychoanalysis to make then it just a tool, one of his many tools, useful for multidimensional analyses of the individual and society (Fromm, 1976).

I mention this because everyone from the list was attacked at the very beginning of his scientific path for destroying the most traditional and peaceful belief: that man is perfect and rational because he always knows well what he is doing and why. The peaceful order of the existing theories was so attractive that new ideas needed strong evidence and decades to replace the previous description of reality in an appropriate proportion. It is interesting that outstanding scientists like Einstein or Dawkins commented social sciences, but their practical impact on the development of the mainstream of economics was negligible to our century. Just in case, I would like to add here that 'influential' Marxism was rather a religious belief and not a

science. Moreover, sometimes natural borrowings in social science appeared in such a caricatured form as Spencer's social Darwinism introducing the 'survival of the fittest' to the development of societies in terms of an animal violence (Spencer, 1864). Economics has essentially remained 'Newtonian', in the terminology of physics, and I do not see any revolutionary breakthrough comparable to the Einstein's general theory of relativity in physics.

## 4 My Comment on Climate Policy

In your passage on climate policy, I found the sentence: 'The idea of unilateral reductions is nonsense, but – as aprioristic – it is not subject to rational judgement'. I understand that this formulation was polemically useful in your text, but does it not a sin with superficiality? You have assumed that public statements about the unilateral effort to reduce greenhouse gas emissions are motivated by the lack of economic knowledge on public goods and supported by stupid politicians. I agree that the media are dominated by inspired statements about global responsibility, moral debt and Europe's obligations, but this is not enough to explain everything by ignorance or wishful thinking.

Let us take Germany as an example, I propose to guess that the narrative about caring for the environment and all humanity is only a cover and masking of the pragmatic strategy adopted more than a dozen years ago to obtain comparative advantage (in Europe and in the world) as a result of a significant shift of the economy to renewable energy sources and significantly improved energy efficiency. For politicians, green arguments are media actions and social legitimacy of actions aimed at obtaining an economic advantage in producing energy compared to other economies. Of course, what is the best solution for Germany today; it may not be the best moment for major countries, even highly developed ones. Take, for example, the US secession from the climate policy (even before Trump) because America decided to shape its energy strategy independently from the rest of the world.

There is a phrase: 'do not pour the child out with the bath'. In my opinion, it fits perfectly the speaker taking a position which relate to the absurd EU climate policy and at the same time keeping silent on that: Poland is backward and sleepy in the process of switching to renewable energy and we have rapidly shrinking fossil

fuel resources, yet we do not do enough to improve the efficiency of energy production and supply. Yes – the EU climate dictate does not subject well to the Polish economy. No – it is not possible to extend indefinitely the current energy system in Poland. Climate policy reducing carbon dioxide emissions, with all its flaws, means not the delusional ‘stopping of climate change’, but the actual adaptation through the fundamental change and modernisation of domestic energy system for the future.

## 5 My Comment on Education

Your chapter about a student who, due to his ignorance, demanded independently from the teacher to recognise his wrong mental effort directs my comment to another problem. The problem of great importance is not the fact that the student demanded recognition based on his falsely constructed reason. The problem now is the multiplying student’s new rights which happens at the cost of prestige and authority of the teacher. It is not just like this that now students love irrationality and ignorance more than it was before. It is the education system that systematically lowers the position of a scientist and teacher, deliberately destroys the real foundations of authority, pushes people who are ignorant or even lacking talents to question the importance of knowledge and traditional values that in fact have shaped the master and student relationship for centuries. The favourite educational figure of relativisation says: ‘if is it a professor or a scientist it does not matter, let her/him sit on the bench and listen to what everyone else would like to say, as well as the weakest students’.

Then your justified critics concentrated about a priori judgements which replace education and scientific knowledge in public debate. However, one step further you claimed: ‘People ignore rationality, but they want good in their own way’. Firstly, this sentence is nothing else but a pure a priori judgement which is a surprising one after your diatribe directed against any priori judging. Clear setback in a dispute with those whom would you like to convince that they should be more dependent on science, and keep their a priori judgements for themselves. Secondly, there is no hope of resolving such an arbitrary thesis dealing with axiology. In fact, opinion that ‘people want good’ or on the contrary ‘people want evil’ are both a priori judgements that cannot be proved. In turn, the gently dependent phrase ‘in their own way’ relativised and weakened this thesis.

By default, you probably wanted to connect to classical philosophy, perhaps to Socrates, but the contemporary context excludes such a simple reference to the universal good as well as objective good.

In the paragraph recalling Leonardo da Vinci, you are surprised that the turn of the century was characterised by growing irrationalism. I’m surprised that you are surprised. At least since the French Revolution, we have a trend that is steady and strong around the world. I mean promotion of mass culture everywhere. It began with noble slogans (freedom, equality, brotherhood), but after this breakthrough new and new demands are appearing, increasingly possessive and even more radical. Certainly, changes built on the foundation of altruistic humanism appeared in the positive form: limited child labour, equal pay for men and women, the eradication of racism, etc. However, they are followed by the equally proliferating appetites of all previously neglected or marginalised groups. This appetite will never be met until everything (including education, science, culture, politics, etc.) will not be reduced to a level that is understood and accepted by the vast majority (Sloterdijk, 2000). Yes – it can comfort ourselves that the average citizen of the globe eats now better and knows more than before. However, the increasingly painful mode for this improvement is, among other things, the universal right for all to speak on all imaginable topics. If my reasoning is accurate, why should irrationality not dominate in any public debate in 2020 AD?

## 6 My Comment on Economics

Next issue is your assessment of abstract thinking on economics. First of all, I do not agree that the abstract approach in social sciences, consisting of a building a coherent theory, is only ‘more difficult’ than in natural sciences. Especially, when it comes to classical mechanics (your example) that is in confrontation with social sciences, the difference is fundamental and enormous. I start here from the opinion of Rodrik (2015): there are no universal theories in the social sciences and the best we can achieve is a set of conditional explanations. I searched for a good example where uncertainty and lack of coherent theory create problems and found it also within natural sciences: a comparison between paleontology and climatology. The paleontologist does not know all, but the material for him is there: fossils of several million years of life on our planet. The availability of excavated items may



change of course. They can improve knowledge of the location of extinct species and the classification of various organisms. However, until a revolutionary change in the theory of evolution, our paleontologist can use this theory and puzzle how to adjust his new discoveries in its frames. The image is incomplete and therefore still somewhat abstract, but the filled part of the predictable whole expands. The climatologist has also facts from the past but must look into the future and take into account the probability of events of varying scale and range. He adopts assumptions and builds sophisticated models to get answers just like a modern fortune-teller. It is hard to imagine a professional paleontologist who interchangeably uses both creationist approach and other theories. However, you can easily imagine climatologist, who overestimates or underestimates the importance of: the consequences of continents drift, the role of magnetic currents, the importance of algae in the absorption of carbon dioxide by the global ocean, etc. Comparison of the cognitive situation involving social science with climatology contains unpleasant similarities, but discloses also another problem. A sociologist or economist because of some inaccurate predictions can harm more than any revisionist historian, not to mention our modest paleontologist.

The second issue related to abstract thinking is your belief that in teaching economics, abstraction and empiricism are carefully maintained. You wrote that in your class that you try to keep balance by illustrating the theories given with numerous examples from practice to show how reason must fight ignorance or false intuition. In my opinion, we teach almost exclusively theory, especially when we compare economics to empirical sciences, but we demand that we be treated as empirically engaged and effective. I explain just in case: in my understanding we do teach empiricism in accounting exercises and in the laboratory of online operations. Unfortunately, it is not science in a strict sense, but schooling, teaching craft skills, and pragmatic implementation into the profession. Economics is as far from experimental sciences as a modern experimental economics just like from a chemical laboratory. And what about teaching abstract economic theories? Representatives of narrowly defined economics schools want to pretend to be sure paleontologists, but they still stumble, because what is happening around them requires immediate verification or abandonment of yesterday's hypothesis. Heterodox economists are hiding themselves behind holism to cover the fact that they resemble a climatologist who would rather not say

loudly what the weather will be tomorrow, moreover whether it will be warmer in 500 years or whether glaciation period will happen in 1,00,000 years. It is characteristic that everyone wants to talk about the climate in the mass media, except for professional climatologists. Economists do not have such moral resistance. In case of spectacular mistakes, they can always apply self-criticism by admitting fault to some assumptions made for the model or just blaming accidental events independent of the researcher.

Eventually Rodrik (2015) can be right by saying that economics values intelligence rather than common sense. I do not disparage economics as a science. I am only trying to emphasise the boundaries of economics (Rodrik, 2015): theories in economics are either so general that they do not translate into reality or so detailed as to explain a specific part of it at best. Moreover, Ludwig von Mises argued in his book 'Theory and History' that social sciences must take thoughts, ideas and judgements of value as ultimately given in the analysis of human action (von Mises, 1957). His conclusion is clear: economics, like history (and paleontology), feels really good and confident, talking about the past only. And yet in faculties of economics, we no longer like to teach the history of economic thought or economic history which are open to theories and are perfectly meeting the criteria of science. Perhaps because in these areas there is a relatively little space for popular media statements and currently for the very fashionable modelling.

## 7 My Comment on Higher Education

I cannot confirm this opinion: 'We like a broad perspective and we rightly assume that our students expect us to document erudition'. I refer to your wording with the general quantifier and in turn I have to negate it. First observation and my first negation: the younger the scientists and academics, the greater the insensitivity, indifference and sometimes even reluctance to 'wider perspective'. Peer-reviewed articles, master's theses and heard postdoctoral, doctoral, master's and bachelor's exams are an inexhaustible source of evidence for me which all corroborate that my assessment is right. General knowledge is no longer valued, the 'wider perspective' is seen either as ballast or as unnecessary hassle. Neglects begin with minor events, such as superficial

text checking for spelling, linguistic, grammatical and conceptual correctness. More and more often someone ceases to pay attention to bibliography, thus, links and online sources advance to the role of the most adequate literature of the subject. The scientist quite often skips quickly the introductory part and goes to his beloved topic (e.g. portfolio analysis in brief, the Ansoff matrix under study, and then hundred pages on five versions of alpha coefficient). It is relatively rare to find the author's comment that the approach applied is based on certain assumptions (sometimes a priori judgements or poorly documented facts!) of only one of so many theories. Even less often it can be read about the practical usefulness of the obtained solution. Almost never can be found a list of restrictions to the study that must result from adopting a broader perspective (geography, society, politics, environment, etc.) of the problem under consideration.

My second negation: the younger the students the more limited thinking horizons, and every new generation embraces life with an increasingly pragmatic attitude. There are glorious exceptions, but most have their clear priorities: work full-time position during studies, earn as much as possible, learn only things related to their work, get diploma at least cost and go ahead in the direction of narrowly defined selected skill. I must add that I am communicating with average recipients of academic knowledge. My personal advice: as a teacher you should forget about famous quotes, the use of names of outstanding personalities from science, culture, or history, and do not try to refer to current events from the country and the world. This is why I do not see the purpose of discussing the proportion of wide and narrow perspectives in education. The perspective is only narrow not since yesterday (both sides of educators and educated) and no one thinks and worries because of the loss of the traditional academic ethos. This narrow perspective, increasingly specialised and focused on practical aspects, suggests an inevitable evolution from the University to something what should be called vocational (high) school education.

## 8 My Comment on Universities

And now my reply to the last paragraph, where you ask with care: 'how to make scientific knowledge be recognised first by our students and then by employers?' I signal here my doubts and some hidden traps in this text. My associations with your quote go

in a different direction than just to improve targeting of the education process. I would ask the following questions that should reveal the deeper layers of the problem. First question: is the role of university, from a historical and social point of view, to gain recognition from students? Second question: is the university's role to provide the right number of employees tailored to the needs of employers? Of course, I think that a modern university should not be an ivory tower and should not underestimate the needs of society. However, I see this problem without the absolute dominance of the usefulness criterion. The university should give society an added value in the form of knowledge, pass on this knowledge to students, and in the end should guarantee the country that the intellectual elite, who are taught, modern and properly specialised, will be the driving force of innovation, entrepreneurship, social involvement and cooperation, improving the quality of state institutions and its policies (Jaspers, 1946). To paraphrase the saying of the Hasidic tzaddik convinced of the rightness of specific actions at a particular moment: 'if not now, then when, if not them, then who?'

The directive on gaining student' acceptance must lead to all unfavourable manifestations of mass culture. A rhetoric question: where from the student had come forward who wanted his wrong result to have the same importance as that one of the professor's? He not only passively expected the recognition of his opinion, he actively demanded its recognition of his untruth. It is better to be aware that, as a part of the educational deviation, some less recognised American universities have already issued circulars on how lecturer should respond to the claims of some aggressive students in order to 'recognise their needs'. In turn, a private employer as a rule (with the exception of special centres such as Silicon Valley) is never interested in wider perspectives, he dislikes confrontation with an interdisciplinary knowledge, he is even afraid of a graduate with several faculties. I am sure that the closer alliance between higher education and business will result in funding new high schools like a High School of Advertising, High School of Warehousing, High School of Accounting, etc. However, it is worth considering that in this super pragmatic and commercial American academic structure, not all universities follow the same path. The second class universities progress in the field of home services, cosmetology, and bookkeeping and of course insurance, but those from the first league convey the traditional academic education and not only those practical skills useful at work.

## 9 Final Reflection

I would like to point out that my message is not exceptionally original or innovative. The opinion, assessment and conclusion invoked by me has already been made by well-known and respected commentators in the fields of art, philosophy, sociology, psychology and economics (Huxley, 1932; Canetti, 1960; Sloterdijk, 2000; Furedi, 2004; Rodrik, 2015). However I must say with sadness that open debates on topics similar to your text and my answer do not exist. Instead of discussion, there is a growing media talk-shows conducted without responsibility and without any positive consequences. The leftist fairy tale about the necessity for the Red Cap to kill a capitalist-wolf still holds fast while the alleged progressive intellectuals are plunging into the postmodern version of 'relativism at all costs'. In addition, after the elections in many countries, the ghost of parochial populism is gaining support and popularity. Even worse, drifting in the stream of populist thesis dominates among academic people and scientists. Depending on their political affiliation they tell that Brussels knows everything or just the opposite that EU is very bad and useless. Nevertheless, they unite in views that the decisions of the ministry must be authoritatively carried out, that the rector always knows better, that the dean cannot do anything about it and the scientist must complete the multiplied forms obediently (e.g. educational effects!) according to the formula provided by an anonymous administrator.

Furedi's (noteworthy title of his book: 'Where have all intellectuals gone?') notes that modernity continues in an increasingly inertial movement towards mass culture and is dominated by three criteria in this mechanism: usefulness, non-exclusion and accessibility (Furedi, 2004). At the beginning there was a nice trinity: freedom-equality-brotherhood. Now, we can observe how a specific and mutated idea of democracy is functioning today. Certainly, it is not the elite model of ancient Greece, or the civic model of modern Switzerland. After the Second World War, prosperity turned out to be an accelerator of change, which brought the mass to the role of an idol, fetish, almost a natural law. There is a lot of pros when considering phenomena and processes from the point of view of democratisation. Pros far outweigh the cons if you adopt a humanistic point of view and think about removing the dangers to life namely illiteracy, homelessness, hunger and other scourges that once accompanied the majority of the world's

population. Your text, Tomasz, was mainly about reason and higher education, so I will limit my critical conclusions to this field. It is worth remembering, however, that I could multiply exactly the same remarks and comments in relation to the situation of art that is becoming more and more mass culture – not only because of mass access to it, but because of its radicalness and programmes which lower its level at the expense of high culture and elites. The last years in our country are also an obvious evidence, what means introduction of mass voluntarism to politics at the expense of the rule of law.

Erasmus of Rotterdam wrote his ironic treatise on stupidity long time ago. I do not see much sense in calling for reason in public debate and strengthening the role of reason through a priori (sic!) appeals to good. Stupidity was present in the past, exists now, and also will flourish in the future. Or the same picture seen from the other side: rationality and wisdom will be always in the minority, they will be a rare good and therefore they must be protected and cared for, especially in public life. It is easier not to know than to know, because the latter involves thinking, effort, requires time, and favourable conditions. I criticise your overstatement of reason in the context of education at the highest level, because of the real drama of the university and culture observed at the beginning of the 21st century. I see our time neither in media irrationalism, nor in a priori judgements confused with knowledge (and therefore not in underestimating reason) but in surrendering without reflection to the ideology based on the primacy of the three criteria of the mass domination mentioned by Furedi. Regarding the mass, I refer to Sloterdijk's book 'Contempt of the Masses', which, to the detriment of its other ideas, can be summarised in one sentence: the despised masses emancipated in order to be able to openly contempt and despise minorities, which include also more cultured and wiser members of society (Sloterdijk, 2000). By the way, World War II proved the possibility of mass murder, and 11 September, 2001 marked the beginning of an era of mass terrorism. Unfortunately, in both these phenomena someone can easily find the presence of a reason and even a quite formal logic.

The first false idol is usefulness. Bentham's utilitarian interpretation of the world sometimes evokes a smile of pity nowadays (Bentham, 1788). Probably prematurely, because forces of the masses can outbid Bentham's personal decision to donate his skeleton to medical doctors after his death, and



to expose his stuffed and dressed skin to public view. Usefulness is a very important feature, even a sine qua non-condition for the success of practical activities aimed at producing all the goods we need. We teach about utility and use value, forgetting that one should not throw into one conceptual bag of utility a hammer, large forest, happy marriage, Wojtkiewicz's picture, our knowledge and talents. The listed objects create their own micro-worlds. It is true that there are methods that can determine the economic value of non-market goods. I will skip the issue of research effort and arbitrariness of some estimates, it is more important to say that only in relation to the hammer we will be able to measure its usefulness by determining the willingness to pay. We can neglect that it may be a unique hammer of somebody's beloved grandfather, because we will not make a mistake still claiming that its utility value in the social dimension is connected with the usefulness for hammering nails. Talking about forests or marriages could be a longer story – depending on what advantages and benefits we would like to analyse from the perspective of economic points. Art, education and knowledge, which for sure are foundations of our civilisation, were formed and developed in an alliance with usefulness and utility, but never only thanks to them and never only for them. Warning suggested by Rodrik (2015) claims that is not uncommon for economists to behave as productivity and moreover other social goals were synonymous with each other.

Let's stick with knowledge and universities. For thousands of years, university institutions have sought independence and shaped themselves to be in conflict with the rulers of this world. In ancient times, the ruler could interfere, punish and kill. In the Middle Ages and after patronage was noted, often in a very mild and tolerant form. For centuries, the rulers benefited from the knowledge that is protected and disseminated by universities, and then they agreed to their autonomy and did not ask questions about their usefulness. The Chinese emperor demanded all innovations to be brought to his palace just for the private use of the emperor in his gardens. Europe moved forward because the usefulness of knowledge was appreciated, but despite the violent times and the rulers' appetite for power, this knowledge was absolutely left a reserve of university freedom and was disseminated. In fact, up to XX. rulers of this world did not ask universities to provide measurable and reported utility. They were content with the graduates filling of offices, factories, schools, etc., supplied by the universities and thus an elevated level of mind and

social well-being (Jaspers, 1946). Only black and red totalitarian systems brought about a change. Power over the citizens must be unlimited, and therefore academic people started to win medals and scientific titles for ideologically correct theories or sometimes murderous inventions. By the way, the alliance of the university world with military sector has consolidated and did not disappear in a period of peace. The novelty is that XXI. age offered us the totalitarian reasoning that the university should stop dealing only with the creation and disseminating of knowledge, and should focus much more on useful knowledge providing measurable benefits as soon as possible.

In paternalistic and conceited concern for the fate of those eager to educate the masses, it was decided that the university does not have to make students wiser (reason!), it does not have to feed their knowledge, because it is enough if it makes graduates just prepared and be useful for modern societies. It is no longer the role of the university to release people with broad horizons into the world who, regardless of the profession finally chosen, are the intellectual capital of that society by the definition. The benefit understood in this way was considered to be insufficient, because it is too uncertain and too far-reaching. The attitude of many pseudo-modern educators to the problem of mass-teaching has led to the development of mechanisms that set higher education criteria appropriate for an automotive school (practical skills criterion) or a tailor's shop (criterion of matching to the client).

The second and the third false idol are combined together: non-exclusion and accessibility. I declare that I know very well that throughout history both criteria have resulted in measurable positive results: same rights for masses of people of different skin, women, children, people with disabilities, people with reduced cognitive abilities, etc. It is true that in this good direction, much and well has been done so far. In particular all citizens in a richer country know that they have all their rights, that they would be treated properly, that they would be represented in all spheres of social life, that they would not be threatened by exclusion or marginalisation, etc. Thus, all this is arranged in a beautiful manner and rather accepted new reality. The problem is that the false innovators think that also art, education and scientific knowledge have to incorporate exactly the same non-exclusion and available options.

## 10 Conclusions

I am arriving to the conclusions stressing that I am not against the usefulness of knowledge, but against utility to be considered the most important and decisive criterion in the organisation, shaping and assessment of universities. Non-exclusion and accessibility are perfectly fine as a program of social solidarity in many public activities of the state, but they are unacceptable regarding the activities of universities and their basic tasks related to creating knowledge and sharing it according to the highest criteria.

The three fetishes listed above – usefulness, non-exclusion and accessibility – behave in the real world like the broom in the story ‘The Sorcerer’s Apprentice’. Once applied, the model of change becomes an inert mechanism and gains momentum. Universities are changing faster now than when they were controlled by an ideologically motivated and omnipotent dictator. The direction of change leaves no doubt. Less popular chairs and faculties can be easily liquidated. Restoring them, however, will be a problem. It is easy to remove less crowded teaching subjects from the university, close less practice-oriented specialisations or dismiss specialists from some less useful (today!) classes. This is claimed to be ‘only’ a change in the organisational form, modernisation of curricula and rationalisation of employment, and as such it will not appear in the public debate and will not concern an assessment of its real and long-term social costs.

I believe that there are still such fundamental social values as trust, credibility, authority, prestige, etc. which have traditionally been associated with an academic environment. Annihilation can be done very quickly at the expense of the quality of the traditional university ethos, but such changes are always harmful and irreversible. Certainly, such changes do not result in cohesion and sustainability of social structures. This is why I end up with a pessimistic warning taken from the elegy of Friedrich Hölderlin: ‘so that we, preoccupied with what is useful, do not miss the essence of that declining season’.

## Acknowledgement

This paper refers to the historical patterns of journalism. Scientific journals in the past have been a place of dialogue and exchange of views followed with interest. It’s not like this anymore. However,

circumstances of this publication are exceptional due to the jubilee. Invited to propose a paper for a special issue of the Journal, I started to think about our conversations, discussions and polemics during my more than 40-year friendship with Tomasz Żylicz within the walls of the Faculty of Economic Sciences, University of Warsaw.

The beginnings during the martial law in Poland were a bit freak: Tomasz Żylicz, Jerzy Śleszyński and Kazimierz Piesowicz created a semi-confidential and semi-legal company of economists interested in environmental protection. Kazimierz Piesowicz was a Faculty lecturer and author of several books on economic history; he died on January 11, 1985. The meetings were self-didactic and formative. The next step was the establishment of the publishing house resembling a faculty ‘samizdat’ named ‘EKO<sup>2</sup>’ (economics multiplied by ecology). Intriguing and still valuable copies of this irregularly issued periodical can still be found. It is worth recalling the first issue in this series, published in 1986, and the first issue that we published jointly: Śleszyński (1986); Śleszyński, Żylicz (1986). The next event was the establishment of the Warsaw Ecological Economics Center in a separate room (number 306) and in those days it was a priceless library. Tomasz Żylicz was the originator and driving force of these projects, and I had my pleasure to participate actively from the very beginning. The lack of internet and smartphones meant that our contacts were numerous, and thus frequent exchange of views was something natural.

I skip in this acknowledgment the next important stages of our cooperation, such as joint articles, research projects and our substantive support for the Ministry of the Environment. I would like to return to my memories of our stimulating discussions, which for years have covered current and difficult issues of ecological economics. Unfortunately, two last decades have not been fertile in this respect. However, I found it interesting to propose here my answer to the written statement of Tomasz Żylicz, which I received from him in 2015 after our discussion.

The paper as an e-mail attachment that I have received 5 years ago had a regular form of public expression, which is why I allow myself to put here my answer sent almost immediately to Tomasz but not shared with anyone else so far. The narrative adopted in my paper makes it easy to see what thoughts and theses of the source text are commented on. The paper takes the form of a letter reply because originally it was addressed to Tomasz. The subject of my discourse is

primarily the rationality in general and the institution of university in the context of teaching and practicing science, including first of all economics and ecological economics. The text of my original answer has been shortened and some superfluous footnotes have been removed.

## References

- Bentham, J. (1788). *Defense of Usury*. London: Payne & Foss.
- Bergson, H. (1907). *L'Évolution créatrice*. Paris: Félix Alcan.
- Canetti, E. und Macht, M., & Hamburg, C. V. (1960). Trad. ingl. *Crowds and Power presso C. Stewart*. Hamburg: Claassen.
- Darwin, K. (1859). *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection, or the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life*. London: John Murray.
- Dawkins, R. (1976). *The Selfish Gen*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Einstein, A. (1920). *Relativity: The Special and General Theory*. New York: H. Holt and Company.
- Erasmus of Rotterdam. (1922). *Erasmus in Praise of Folly*. New York: Peter Eckler Publishing Co.
- Freud, S. (1917). *Vorlesungen zur Einführung in die Psychoanalyse*. Wien: H. Heller.
- Fromm, E. (1976). *Haben oder Sein*. Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlagsanstalt.
- Furedi, F. (2004). *Where have all the Intellectuals Gone?* London: Bloomsbury.
- Hegel, G. W. F. (1807). *System der Wissenschaft. Erster Teil, Die Fänomenologie des Geistes*. Bamberg und Würzburg: Joseph Anton Gebhardt.
- Huxley, A. (1932). *New Brave World*. London: Chatto & Windus.
- Jaspers, K. (1946). *Die Idee der Universität*. Berlin-Heidelberg: Springer-Verlag.
- Marx, K. (1887). *Capital: A Critical Analysis of Capitalist Production*. London: Swan Sonnenschein, Lowrey & Co.
- Nietzsche, F. (1908). *Ecce Homo. Wie man wird, was man ist*. Leipzig: Insel Verlag.
- Rodrik, D. (2015). *Economics Rules: Why Economics Works, When it Fails, and How to tell the Difference*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Sloterdijk, P. (2000). *Die Verachtung der Massen: Versuch über Kulturkämpfe in der modernen Gesellschaft*. Berlin: Edition Suhrkamp.
- Spencer, H. (1864). *Principles of Biology. Vol. 1*. London: Williams & Norgate.
- Śleszyński, J. (1986). *Spoleczne systemy wartości a presja na środowisko przyrodnicze*. Warszawa: EKO<sup>2</sup>, Zeszyt 8601, Wydział Nauk Ekonomicznych, Uniwersytet Warszawski.
- Śleszyński, J., Żylicz, T. (1986). *Warszawa jako przedmiot badań ekonomiczno-ekologicznych*. Warszawa: EKO<sup>2</sup>, Zeszyt 8616, Wydział Nauk Ekonomicznych, Uniwersytet Warszawski.
- von Mises, L. (1957). *Theory and History*. Yale: Yale University Press.