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## **Disentangling power and discourse: the case of “master and servant” in Serbian higher education reform\***

An incident happened in 2006, concerning the question of whether students who had graduated from Serbian universities should, in accordance with the European Credit Transfer System, be awarded the title of Masters, since their previous education matched the master requirements. This argument encountered a decisive opposition from higher education bodies, whose representatives feared that granting graduates the title of master would turn them away from pursuing MA degrees, which would represent a great loss of money for higher education institutions. Fierce debates and public protests by students ensued, while the media and students themselves increasingly sought to portray their struggle for the recognition of titles as the struggle against neoliberalization and globalization of education. The debates came to an abrupt end in November 2006, just prior to elections, when a governmental body - to much surprise and opposition from public education institutions - passed a bill stating that students can be awarded the title of Masters.

My analysis concentrates on "disentangling" this incident and pointing to vested interests in the field of educational reform in Serbia. I claim that, despite the seemingly empowering discourse of the students, their voices were actually appropriated by a number of Serbian political parties and used as an asset in the electoral struggle. The key lesson to be drawn from this example is that anthropologists should strive for precise understanding of the cultural context and social forces that shape the field, in order to fully apprehend the reproduction of power structures in higher education.

### **I Introduction**

This text represents an interpretation of, and reflection on, a sequence of events that marked the reform of higher education in Serbia in 2006. It is presented in a documentary-historical manner, though structured in view of Bourdieu's theories of field (1998). The events are first interpreted in view of the strategies and (supposed) goals of the major actors and stakeholders, and then analyzed within the wider structure of the political scene that includes not only Serbia but also its surrounding, Europe. The first portion of the texts concentrates on the characteristics and specifics of the (transforming) educational system in Serbia. The event, or series of events, that

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\* This paper represents a work still in progress, meaning that some parts and references are incomplete. It should be taken as a framework for presentation, not a finished piece.

are used as a basis for analysis are presented next. Finally, an interpretation is offered that takes into account the interaction between actors and field, as well as the difference (and similarities) between those who, in this case, perform discourse, and those who wield real political power to use it in their agendas. This motive is used as a concluding point of the text, and a starting point for discussion.

## **II The field**

Serbia is a country that lies southeast of Slovenia, the host country of this conference, geographically belonging to the same region but culturally occupying increasingly different domains of reality. The reason for this latter statement, of course, lies not in geography but in history and politics. Though at a time both Serbia and Slovenia belonged to the same state – the Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia – the breakup of this state left them in rather different positions. Slovenia was the first republic to secede from the Federation, and although the Yugoslav Army's attempts at blocking this caused a number of military skirmishes between them and the local forces, the entire process finished without enormous losses and relatively peacefully. Serbia's involvement in the secession of other republics – Croatia and then Bosnia-Herzegovina – was, however, far less peaceful. In half a decade of bloody civil war that ensued, all sides suffered innumerable losses, and the number and consequences of committed crimes and atrocities are only beginning to be apprehended. Although it was not fought on its territory (Serbia never officially admitted to being at war, and its presence was mostly manifested through paramilitary formations and tacit support), the wars in the 1990s left Serbia economically exhausted and politically isolated. NATO bombing in 1999 further destroyed its economy and production, but – as a positive consequence – led to the final toppling of Serbia's leader, Slobodan Milošević, who was the man chiefly responsible for its policies during the breakup of Yugoslavia, and Serbia's involvement in that war. In 2000, the new, pro-European, democratically elected government professed a profound turn in all political aspects, and firmly set Serbia on the European trajectory where, it was assumed, it is supposed to join other countries in the European Union (see for instance Ramet and Pavlaković, eds. 2007).

Alas, the good times did not last for long. After a brief period of positive upheaval – 2 to 3 years – Serbia, unlike most transitional countries, again reverted to the patterns of political instability. It appeared as if both nationalist, isolationist and criminal elements in the society had regained their grounds and were once again dictating the inner dynamics of political life. Ever since, the struggles and tensions in the Serbian politics resurface over and over again. They are usually understood in terms of binary oppositions, among which the most prominent is the tension between pro-European, modernist, democratic currents, and those who are more conservative, traditional, authoritarian, nationalist (and often pro-Russian as well) (see Pešić 2006).

As can be imagined, education has not remained outside these struggles. Always a potent form of political capital, education was, even in the times of Socialism, understood to have significant impact on social dynamics, so much that one of the first all-encompassing education reforms in this part of the world saw the introduction of Vocational Education, whose goal was to revert and prevent the reproduction of social and class inequalities that Communism claimed to have erased. In a state of degradation – as much as other public services – during the crisis in the 1990s, the change of government in 2000 brought a pompous announcement of a thorough and all-encompassing reform of the educational system. In accordance with the general policy orientation, education was understood to be a key component in the transformation of Serbian society into a modern, pro-European, developing one. This agenda was embraced by the international community and the reform of the education system was thoroughly funded or supported by international aid agencies and reconstruction funds. However, despite its professed modernizing and European orientation, education reform very early on started exhibiting signs of inconsistency or at least unwillingness to confront the backward, conservative forces in the society. For instance, one of the first acts in the education reform was to introduce the subject known as Religious Education to primary and secondary schools (see Baćević 2005). Besides violating the principle of separation of Church from the State and being problematic from the standpoint of human rights (especially those pertaining to minority groups), this act gave an unprecedented influence and presence in the public sphere to the Serbian Orthodox Church, an entity that was in civil society often forcefully criticized for nationalist attitudes and the open endorsement of genocidal policies and association with war criminals that some of its officials had exercised during the war in former Yugoslavia.

In the domain of higher education, things were perhaps less dramatic, but the stakes were higher. Universities in Serbia (headed by the one in Belgrade, as the oldest HE institution, and situated in the capital) were uniformly understood as grounds for breeding the future elite. Many members of existing political structures also held positions at universities. In addition to this, the student body itself was taken to be a very significant and influential political factor. Without need to resort to the legacy of 1968<sup>1</sup>, the students in Serbia organized and led a series of anti-regime protests in 1996/7 that represented a serious challenge to Milošević's regime and brought wide international media attention to his opponents. Therefore, "students' opinion" – regardless of who represented it – was never taken lightly.

Another reason brought added value to higher education: this was the level on which changes were to be most profound. Though the education reform from 2000 onwards did, of course, encompass primary and secondary schools, it was the domain of higher education that was to

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<sup>1</sup> Besides being a revolutionary year in many other countries, 1968 also saw a rise of large student unrest at the University of Belgrade – a protest that, intellectually and politically, had a lot in common with the one in France in May that year. Similarly, it failed to significantly destabilize the then-omnipotent Communist regime, led by Josip Broz Tito.

undergo most significant changes. In order to understand those changes – and, eventually, reactions to them, including the case analyzed in this study – we must for a while longer remain within the framework of recent history and look at the transition of higher education in Serbia.

During Communism and Socialism, virtually all educational institutions in Serbia were public and state-owned. Primary education was compulsory; secondary education was optional, as well as tertiary, or university education. All of these were free, in line with the egalitarian *credo* that education should be accessible to all. However, this should be taken with a pinch of salt in the case of university education; it was free to a number of students – those who had highest scores at entrance examinations – but to others it was not; they – or, most often, their parents – paid a portion of or the whole price of tuition. However, the price was not too high, and the status of “self-financed”, “co-financed” or “state-financed” student was held to, in most cases at least, accurately reflect the capabilities of its bearer. In addition, a number of mechanisms were devised to facilitate financing – if students did well, they could soon change their status; there were also state- or locally-sponsored scholarships for those who excelled. From the students’ point of view, higher education was - at least, again, in most cases – a pleasurable and relatively easy affair. However, Serbia’s economy and productivity did pay the price. Although the official data from this period are scarce and hard to interpret, higher education lasted for much longer than in other countries (it seems the average length of studying was 9 years). The crisis in the nineties additionally brought into daylight the frequent uselessness of university degrees in making a living. Even after 2000, economy did not start recovering swiftly enough to significantly expand the job market for the highly educated. Education was still largely a public affair; however, the state started lacking funds to support it.

Higher education in Serbia had, therefore, to achieve economic sustainability – firstly for itself, and then, hopefully, for the country. The idea guiding the transformation process was that the educational sector would grow from a massive, overcrowded, inefficient one, to one suited to the requirements of Serbia as a modern transitional country fast paving its way towards the European Union. A model for this transformation was already laid out. Although present at preceding ministerial conferences, Serbia officially became part of the Bologna process in 2003 in Berlin. This meant that educational authorities have subscribed to the agenda of modifying the educational system so as to fit European standards, enabling Serbia to become part of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). The most significant parts of this process concerned the introduction of study cycles (bachelor, master, doctorate) and the description of quantity and quality of knowledge attained in numeric indicators – known as ECTS points. On a different level, however, the process also called for a significant restructuring of the responsibilities and status of higher education bodies. Among other things, it became clear that universities need to join the market, in order to become self-sustainable and secure their institutional futures (see Olssen and Peters 2005, Apple 2004). This, in turn, entailed a reshuffling of positions and power of various educational actors. It is to these we now turn in the attempt to describe the stage for the events that will be analyzed.

### **III The Actors**

It has already been said that higher education was a relatively highly politically charged field, attracting and hosting many power-holders. In addition, of course, it also held an air of class supremacy, presenting both a resort and breeding ground for the social elite. But it was not only this. With the entrance of higher education into the market (and even before that), holding a position at a university was quickly becoming not only prestigious, but also lucrative.

After 2000, private universities mushroomed, representing a serious competition for the state-funded, public HE institutions. Private universities offered shorter, more targeted courses in fields for which there was highest demand (banking, managements, economy, law), better teacher-to-student ratio, lower requirements and easier and quicker access to degrees. However, public universities retained the advantage in reputation, since in the former Communist society that Serbia was, public opinion was still prevalently suspicious about the quality of education that was “paid for” (at private universities it inevitably was). To beat competition and ensure their survival, the state continued to support public HE institutions financially, while at the same time encouraging them to join the market and start charging for their services. In short, HE in Serbia started its rapid transformation into neoliberalism.

In 2005, a new Law on Higher Education was finally passed. This law, in theory, gave equal status to public and private HE institutions. It was adopted by the Parliament of the Republic of Serbia, which was officially in charge of all important decisions, including those concerning education, thus making the state still the most important actor in this field. What was emerging was a true model of corrupt neoliberalism, in which the state was officially supporting competition between institutions, but “behind the curtains” still giving concessions and support to public ones. The law also established the Conference of Universities in Serbia (KONUS), an overseeing body whose members were representatives of both public and private HE institutions, and which was given broadly defined authority to supervise and counsel the process of higher education transformation in Serbia. However, the majority of power remained concentrated in specific faculties (or schools) – not even in universities, let alone suprainstitutional bodies. The interests of the former were normally represented by members of university administration, who were also faculty members, i.e. professors. Thus we have established the first two groups of most important actors. One is personified in professional politicians, MPs, decision-makers and government officials: their concern with education is of a rather general nature. They are very rarely involved in the educational process; for them, educational reform is just another necessary step towards a desired political goal, which – for majority, in this case – is adherence to European standards as outlined in the Bologna charter and ensuing documents, and the supposed eventual accession to the EU. The second group – university lecturers and administrators – takes active role in the education process. Some of them even teach at both public and private universities. Even when it is not the case, they are very interested in different aspects of educational legislation and organization because it has direct consequences on the organization and incomes of their home institutions. Apart from teaching and research, most of them have

significant outside engagements of varying sorts, based on their authority as university lecturers – those from social sciences, for instance, also often work as political consultants/analysts and are considered important public opinion makers. All this makes them not only influential but also rather financially secure.

Enter the third group, students. Of course, since this is a very large population, it is hard to speak of their general background or interests. However, let's say that they are rather heterogeneous. They study different things, for different lengths of time, with varying success. The vast majority of them is concentrated in Belgrade, the capital of Serbia, at the oldest and most influential of Serbia's public HE institutions, the University of Belgrade. Their interests are represented by a number of student organizations; however, the scope and range of influence students' opinions have on policy decisions is not defined, and in cases where it is officially proscribed, it is normally not observed. Those studying at private universities are usually not as politically involved, and interested mostly in obtaining a degree and securing a job after graduation. However, what this large and heterogeneous group has in common are a few things. One is that they are all interested in completing their studies as soon as possible, and paying for it as little as possible. Since 2000, the prices of education in public HE institutions have tripled, and most of them (or, again, their parents) are already finding it very hard to support their education. Also, in view of the Bologna process, most of them are very eager to obtain internationally recognized degrees that would enable them to spend some time abroad or at least land a more prestigious job at home.

It is within this context, with such defined actors, that we should approach the events briefly described in the introduction. We now turn to the sequence of these events, presented chronologically and with certain ethnographic notes.

#### **IV The game**

As had already been noted, Serbia officially became part of the Bologna process in 2003, at the ministerial conference in Berlin. Certain reforms at all levels of education were at that point already under way, including the much-disputed introduction of religious education. In the domain of higher education, many institutions (led, interestingly, by the private ones) have already begun describing their programs in ECTS points, introducing the two- or three-cycle studies, and issuing internationally compatible degrees. However, the Bologna process means that now there is a formal binding document guiding the structure and pace of the reform of HE in Serbia. What's more, every conference includes a formal grading of a country's progress in Bologna-related reforms, on a 0-5 scale.

On the following ministerial conference in 2005 in Bergen, in spite the pompous announcement of education reform at home, Serbia receives a grade of only 2.2. One of the reasons is the general heterogeneity of educational legislation. So far, the reform process was largely dependent on particular institutions, and thus varied largely not only across institutions, but –

more frequently – between faculties (schools) as well. For example, some faculties have transformed their study cycles into 3+2 years, while others retained the 4+1 structure. Moreover, the dominant form of postgraduate studies in Serbia was not that leading to the title of Masters, and normally lasting one year, but that leading to the title of *magistar* (Mphil) and lasting for 2 years. In many faculties, doctoral studies did not as yet exist.

As a response to the pressure put during the conference in Bergen, the Law on Higher Education was finally passed in 2005. Among other things, this law formalized the three-cycle study process. The first generation of MA and PhD students was to be enrolled in November 2006. The fact that doctoral programs did not as yet exist in many schools did not worry university administrators too much; they reckoned that these programs will be finished during the course of the following year, the exact length of time it would take current MA students to acquire degrees necessary to pursue doctoral studies. In short, it appeared as if HE in Serbia would acquire a relatively stable and respectable image in anticipation of the 2007 conference, which was to be held in London.

However, in October 2006, one little cloud appeared on the university administrators' happy skies. Some months before that, student organizations were preparing a motion for the Conference of Universities in Serbia. Their case called for the equivalence of diplomas (BAs) of those students who had graduated prior to 2005, with later Master degrees. The rationale was simple: most MAs were envisioned as a continuation of 3- or 4-year studies, carrying 180 to 240 ECTS points. However, for students who had graduated prior to 2004, undergraduate studies normally took at least 5 years to complete, and carried a much greater workload, calculated to even exceed the 300 ECTS points required for enrollment in doctoral studies. Therefore, the case put forward before KONUS by representatives of student organizations called for a fair treatment of, conditionally speaking, pre- and post-Bologna diplomas. If those students who studied in accordance with previous programs were deemed equivalent with the "new" Masters, they could go on directly to doctoral studies, and thus be spared the "extra" year they would otherwise have to put in. The motion was carefully prepared, the mathematics well done, and – in its session of 19 October 2006, KONUS decided to embrace it. Of course, students were happy, seeing their effort respected and their track to doctoral degrees, and prestigious jobs at home or abroad, fast-forwarded.

Much less so university lecturers and administrators. The decision instantly caused uproar in their circles. Though every HE institution had its representative in KONUS, the rest of university staff did not agree with this decision, and attacks started immediately. The reason behind such a reaction was, again, very simple: money. As had been said, tuition fees (even for "budget", i.e. state-financed students) were on the constant rise. In addition, it had been decided that the number of state-financed postgraduate students would be kept at a minimum. This meant both that HE institutions expected a large portion of their incomes to come from postgraduate study programs, and that (prospective) students were at trouble how to find money to pay for them. The decision of KONUS was therefore, in the financial respect, favorable to students. By

granting them Masters degrees it enabled them to go on directly to doctorates, thus saving them the money they would otherwise have to pay for MA studies. Even if they chose not to pursue their education, they would still bear the title of Masters, not mere Bachelors, as a form of recognition of their investment in their studies, and thus have better chances in the job market. But university administrators had an altogether different rationale. To them, granting the title of Masters to students who had graduated prior to 2005 meant their universities would be “robbed” of tuition money that was to be brought by the generation of students that was to start their post-graduate studies that year – if those students could simply “swap” their diplomas for MA titles, what reason would they – or the majority of them, at least - have for pursuing another MA degree? Of course, this would not represent such a loss of money for HE institutions if those students could simply be redirected towards doctoral studies, which would then become the chief source of income. But, as had been said, doctoral programs – at least those in accordance with Bologna requirements - were, in most cases, not ready yet. Therefore the financing of HE institutions – especially public ones, since their management was only getting accustomed to the idea of commodified knowledge – was to experience a very bad year, one in which it would not gain the income from MA studies it had counted on, in addition, without being able to make up for this difference through PhD studies, since these programs were not yet completed.

The reasons for university staff’s opposition to the equivalence of pre-2005 diplomas and MA degrees were, therefore, clear. However, for almost a month, they were never publicly voiced. What was mentioned instead were general and often fuzzy arguments concerning the “impossibility of equalizing different sorts of programs”, “equal treatment on the job market”, etc. However, the majority of lobbying in the meantime was done far from public eyes. Its result was made visible on November 17, 2006, when KONUS convened again and issued a statement claiming that they had *failed to reach an agreement concerning the equivalence of pre-2005 diplomas and MAs* – a statement that *directly contradicted* the one made a month earlier! What was mentioned was that students wishing to request an equalization of degrees will need to pass additional exams, etc. In the end, KONUS decided to relegate the final decision to the Parliament. But, in the meantime, the protests had already begun.

Sensing the pressure that university administrators would put on members of KONUS, and fearing the possibility of a change of decision, students in Universities of Belgrade and Novi Sad started coordinated protests, requesting not only the acceptance of KONUS’ (first) decision, but also a significant lowering of tuition costs, especially for undergraduate studies. Of course, the revision of KONUS’ decision in November only enraged them further, and protests continued, by this time openly embracing the tones that accused university administrators for “robbing” and “stealing” students’ money. The chief motto of students’ protest at this point was “We study – they profit”, which had sown the seeds of the interpretation of protest as a struggle against neo-liberalism. When KONUS announced their “revised” decision, protests intensified. Students blocked the Faculty of Philosophy in Belgrade, putting an end to teaching, and organizing a protest headquarters in the main building. They ate and slept there, and were closely followed by



the media. In interviews and other public appearances, they repeatedly stated their chief demands – equalizing of degrees and lowering of tuition costs. By this time, the protest had received wide media attention, and anti-global and anti-neoliberal slogans were at the forefront. One of the chief organizers of the protest said:

“It’s as if professors hands are in our pockets...there are some taxes and fees that are charged illegally, and we intend to sue the University for this”...(Tadej Kurepa, source: b92).

Besides from the “we study – they profit” slogan, dominant ones were now “down with tuition fees”, “knowledge is not a commodity”, “I can’t pay”, and “whose are our colleges?”. These slogans, though quite catchy, to some extent revealed the students’ lack of understanding of the problem they sought to attack. It also conveyed a rather naïve Communist rationale on how public funds should be distributed. Nevertheless, spokespeople for the protest always insisted on the critique of neoliberalism as their chief philosophy (Bailović et al. 2007).

The protest itself was a lively affair, closely resembling its predecessor, the student protest 1996/7. It ended on November 20, when the Parliamentary Judiciary Committee issued a statement confirming KONUS’ first decision, and students’ demand – stating that the correct interpretation of the Article 127 of the Law on Higher Education is that pre-2005 graduates *can*, on request, be granted the title of Masters.

Politics in transitional countries can, indeed, be confusing. But this specific sequence of events, I believe, left even the accustomed spectators rather baffled. What causes months of fierce debates and public conflicts within a reform of education that, at least in theory, should have been embraced by all? What causes a supervisory body such as KONUS to, first, make one decision, then revise it, and then relegate it to a governmental body which confirms the first one? What causes university administrators to go directly against students’ welfare? What causes students to accuse their professors of stealing? Finally, what caused all this mess? In order to understand the whole confusion, as well as the role of different actors and their discourses in this event, we must now turn to “disentangling”. In essence, we should look at what different actors say, do, and why. Even more importantly - we must look into political discourse that is not directly linked to education. It is only within those layers of meaning that the whole significance of these events begins to unfold.

## **V The interpretation**

An easy interpretation of events would say that students won this game. Eventually, they got what they asked for – the equalization of pre-2005 diplomas with MAs. In addition, for the first time voices of dissent criticizing the neoliberal face of higher education reform were heard loud and clear – and in all important media, which also brought public sympathies to their authors – students in protest.

However, things were not that simple. Although (unwillingly) succumbing to the governmental directive of equalizing pre-2005 diplomas and Master titles, certain HE institutions found another avenue for raising money: administration. Namely, the bureaucratic procedure of issuing a certified MA degree now costs pre-2005 graduates who file a request for one almost as much as a year of tuition for MA studies would. The government and Ministry of Education remain silent about this, since it is one of basic principles of higher education reform that universities should be financially independent – which means that the state cannot meddle in the prices they charge for services, including the issuing of such certificates.

Still, I claim that we fail to see the chief winners of this game, unless we look at the third group of actors – namely, politicians. Their behavior is no less surprising than the university administrators'. By offering an interpretation of the disputed Article 127 that was to go along with students, they expressed an unprecedented degree of solidarity with them, and in a curious way let down the group they had more intimate and functional connections with – the administrators. Of course, one may claim that this was only the matter of truth, or legal coherence, since the mentioned article indeed allowed for this possibility. However, we need not delve too deeply into legal theory and practice to agree that an interpretation is always first and foremost that – an interpretation. Why, then, did politicians choose to interpret Article 127 in a way favorable to students?

Looking more deeply into the political scene in Serbia, the 2006 protests preceded closely another important date: parliamentary elections, held on 21 January 2007. One of the reasons why the “interpretation” of the famous article was relegated to the Parliamentary Judiciary Committee, instead of the Parliament itself, was that the latter had already been dismissed in preparation for the forthcoming elections. These elections were to test Serbia’s democratic orientation once again. Though the ruling parties at that point were democratic and pro-European, public opinion surveys and indeed election results during the previous years recorded a sharp rise of popular support to an extremist right-wing party, the Serbian Radical Party. Therefore, it was clear that the upcoming elections would represent a serious trial, one whose outcome will determine the proximate future of Serbia in many different manners.

Why were students important in this struggle? Well, it has already been pointed out that they represent a significant and influential part of the electorate. Ever since protests in 1996/7, they had a kind of “special treatment” in the media, and their views were always met with sympathies. In those protests, they supported (though not always explicitly) those democratic forces that were in opposition then, and in power in 2006. During the ten years in between, students’ voices were also often heard, always in support of democratic, modernizing, pro-European policies. Therefore, it was important to “recruit” them once again. Until Fall 2006, no student bodies had given support (explicit or implicit) to any of the sides to participate in the upcoming elections. However, soon after the official ruling of the Parliamentary Judiciary Committee, student campaigns started that sent a very clear message concerning their support to the pro-European parties on the Serbian political scene. This went as far that many student officials openly

supported the Liberal Democratic Party, which, though a relatively minor political force, still stood firmly in support of EU integration and corresponding policies of the country – including neoliberal education policies.

So what became of the critique of neoliberalism? Nothing, of course. What did happen was that students' dissent was used in a way and manner that was fitting to the then-and-future ruling political block – by accentuating their pro-European sides. The other side of their criticism, however, evaporated completely. After the official embracement of the Parliamentary Judiciary Committee's decision concerning equalization of pre-2005 diplomas with MA degrees there were lonely voices that still demanded the lowering of tuition costs, criticizing the concept of "knowledge for sale". However, they were each time quickly relegated to the margins they came from, written off as Leftist or Communist gibberish, and forgotten. Though certain groups among students still continue to campaign against the neoliberalization of higher education in Serbia, the vast majority of their comrades pay the ever-rising fees, pray that their degrees will be EU-compatible, and keep silent.

## **VI Conclusion**

A quite firm connection has commonly been assumed between power and discourse. Foucault, setting the interpretive agenda for discourse studies, assumed that discourse not only reflects the power relations, but also helps (re)create them (Foucault 1990). Wright (1998) defines culture itself as a struggle between different actors to monopolize meaning. Paltridge (2006) This assumption is normally used as a basis for many successful and elegant interpretations of events, thoughts, acts, texts etc. However, on the basis of the event herein described, I would like to draw attention to a few precautions that need to be taken in such interpretations.

In terms of political and educational philosophy, the scope of students' voices represents a significant, and, for those opposed to neoliberalism in HE, pleasant surprise. In any case, this protest openly voiced a critique of aspects of neoliberalism in a country where critical thinking in these terms is virtually non-existent. It represented a powerful force that brought to the forefront of public consciousness issues such as the cost of education, the meaning of knowledge economies, the decline of public sector, etc. In this sense, its power can be compared only to the effect on the awakening of public consciousness of the previous student protest exactly a decade before. Students, and those who presented their discourse in the media, have therefore opened up the Serbian public for issues that were never previously openly mentioned.

However, despite wielding significant discursive power, students have in the end remained relatively powerless in the domain of decision-making. They had been "given" what they asked for – equalization of pre-2005 diplomas with MA degrees – but it was exactly that, "given". They did not earn it by fighting nor public pressure; on the contrary, they were "awarded" this possibility by politicians who in turn secured the one thing they wanted for themselves – general student support, which, if nothing else, helped the ones who received it to again win a majority

on the elections held in January 2007. Therefore, politicians – or a part of this group – were the only true winners of the events in Fall 2006. Students and university administrators both won and lost something.

When it comes to students, they were, to a large extent, victims of their own rhetoric. Despite appearing revolutionary, it did – from the very beginning – contain a gaping contradiction. On the one hand, students were expressing their pro-European views and demanding titles that would make them compatible on the European job market. On the other, however, they criticized neoliberalism and the concept of “knowledge-for-sale” which has for years been predominant exactly in the education systems they strive for! This means that they simultaneously embraced and criticized the neoliberal concept – a rhetorical strategy that is confusing for both its authors and recipients, and whose successful application obviously required more diplomacy or political power than students as a group could hope to attain. As it were, politicians just took the part of students’ discourse they deemed useful – the pro-European one – and applied it in the electoral campaign. Therefore, in the end, it appears that the successful use of discourse did require significant amounts of political power *before* it could be applied to particular, and lasting, ends. Students who protested did perhaps receive the title of Masters, but in this particular power game they also ended up being the Servants.

From the anthropological point of view, this event and its possible interpretations point to one important *caveat*. Namely, it is necessary to always take into account possible discrepancies between discourse and power. In an age of globalism and multiculturalism, the mere fact that certain voices can be heard can mask the fact that securing a space for a certain type of discourse is only the *first step* towards its legitimization and institutionalization (see Wright 1998). In the case of Serbian students’ critique of the neoliberalization of higher education, there is still a long way to go.

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