

# The Socialist Model of Higher Education : The Dream Faces Reality

*Isak Frumin & Daria Platonova*

*This essay explores the socialist model of higher education that originates from early socialist and Marxist thinkers. We contrast this model with Western and Chinese models by focusing on the socialist model's ideals of education as a public good, as free and equal access to instruction, and as a class-based approach to education. Our study of this model employs historical reconstruction and path-dependence analysis to understand the implementation and transformation of these ideals. We discuss early Soviet experiments, the global influence of the model, and its evolution following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. The model's emphasis on state control, specialized training, and production of a skilled workforce is also highlighted. The essay concludes by acknowledging the model's flaws, reflecting on the implications for contemporary higher education, and recognizing its contributions to ideas of social mobility, fair access, and the role of universities in societal development.*

In discussions of higher education, two main historical and cultural models are typically considered: the Continental European model, which is more specialized in practical and theoretical subjects, and the British-American model, which follows a liberal arts approach to all subjects. Occasionally, the Chinese model is included due to its association with Confucianism, a system of thought originating in ancient China that promotes family and social harmony. However, there is another set of principles for arranging the higher-education system that has existed and continues to exist: the socialist model, which millions of students still study within.

To understand how this model has survived and its relevance to contemporary challenges, we need to reconstruct the initial ideas that produced it, because the socialist model has been unlucky in its objective and neutral coverage in the academic literature. Few books and articles have attempted to understand the socialist experiment without either blaspheming or praising it. And often, the instruments built to implement the fundamental ideas behind this model are viewed as the essence of this education system, when, in reality, they are technologies designed to implement its ideas in specific historic, cultural, and economic conditions.

The story of the socialist model is unusual. Unlike the Continental European and British-American models, it was not built gradually through trial and error, but rather as a dream or utopian project that was transformed into the system we see and criticize today. The history of the realization of the socialist model is largely a drama wherein a beautifully spiritual dream of a small group of thinkers and revolutionaries collides with the reality of technological, economic, and human possibilities. To identify the critical elements of the socialist model that have survived and set a deep institutional path for postsocialist models, we rely on two approaches. The first approach is *historical reconstruction*, in which we examine how the basic socialist ideas were transformed in their encounter with technological, economic, and cultural realities, and how some of these ideas contradict each other in practice. The second approach is *path-dependence analysis*, in which we identify the elements of the model that have not completely disappeared after the collapse of socialist regimes.

To begin, we discuss the fundamental ideas behind the model and attempts to implement these ideas. We then examine how these individual elements survived the new conditions of postsocialist development, and conclude by connecting these elements of the socialist model to debates about prospects for higher education that are taking place today. Please note that throughout this essay, we have used the term “communism” to refer to the ideological construct that was the aim of social development in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Europe, and “socialism” to refer to the social order that was officially implemented in the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) and socialist states.

The conceptual foundations of the socialist model of higher education can be traced back to the works of Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, Vladimir Lenin, Antonio Gramsci, and even earlier utopian socialist thinkers like Henri de Saint-Simon, Charles Fourier, and Robert Owen, who Lenin considered an important source of Marxism. Although these theorists mostly wrote about education in a general sense and not universities per se, their ideas still provide insights into the foundations of the socialist model.

The first foundation of this model is the idea of education as a public good rather than a private good. Education, skills development, and personality development were seen as serving the needs of society, rather than individual private interests. The authors of the socialist model recognized that real socialist education should not cater to individual human interests but instead develop human abilities to fulfill public ideals. Fourier made this idea operational by presenting the concept of mechanical harmony, which was partially built on the idea of people as parts of a harmonious and effective social machine. According to Fourier, everyone’s skills should be inserted into the right place. At the same time, he recognized the importance of specific human abilities and how skills develop-

ment should reflect them. Saint-Simon argued that free and accessible education should be a source of inspiration for the nation and should contribute to its progress.<sup>1</sup> Engels extended this idea politically by strengthening the role of the state in “The Principles of Communism,” which influenced his work with Marx in *The Communist Manifesto*: “The education of all children,” they say, “from the moment that they can get along without a mother’s care, shall be in state institutions at state expense.”<sup>2</sup>

The second foundation of the socialist model is the idea that education should be free and equally accessible. This idea first appeared in the writings of the early utopian socialist thinkers previously mentioned and grew from the criticism expressed by Marx and Engels, who denounced existing universities for being instruments of elite reproduction. In his brief tract, “The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte,” Marx quotes the French Constitution: “Education is free. Freedom of education shall be enjoyed under the conditions fixed by law and under the supreme control of the state,” but the founders of Marxism did not provide any insights on the practical implementation of this humanist idea.<sup>3</sup>

The third foundation of the socialist model is the idea of a class-based approach to education. Marx and Engels expressed this idea clearly in *The German Ideology*, a set of manuscripts that critiqued the modern German philosophy of their time:

The class which is the ruling material force of society is at the same time its ruling intellectual force. The class which has the means of material production at its disposal has control at the same time over the means of mental production, so that thereby, generally speaking, the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are subject to it. The ruling ideas are nothing more than the ideal expression of the dominant material relationships, the dominant material relationships grasped as ideas; hence of the relationships which make the one class the ruling one, therefore, the ideas of its dominance.<sup>4</sup>

The logical consequence of this idea is that the dictatorship of the proletariat should bring another set of dominant ideas into the intellectual sphere. In their perspective, the important difference between the dominant ideas of the bourgeoisie and the proletariat was that proletarian ideas were not ideas of dominance or exploitation. They were, instead, ideas of liberation and building a new world. Following this view, the socialist education system could become a mechanism for developing and disseminating these working-class ideas.

**T**hese three ideological foundations, which have influenced and continue to influence intellectuals and education practitioners around the world, faced their first grand challenge of practical implementation when the Russian Revolution broke out in 1917. Lenin and his team faced two practical questions at the time: First, what should they do with traditional Russian universities

that had been growing since the eighteenth century based on a combination of French and German education models? Second, what should be expected from the new model of higher education that considers the big ideas of accessibility, class, and public good while bringing the most value into the development of the first socialist state?

The first question had two possible answers: make existing universities serve the objectives of socialist development or destroy them completely to build something new. The decision to choose the former answer took some time. Initially, the traditional universities were preserved to keep science alive. Yet the Bolsheviks, a radical political faction led by Lenin, did not trust traditional professors from the bourgeoisie to educate the new working-class generation. They also wanted to influence all intellectual fields with Marxist philosophy, a preference that made them critical of the hierarchical structure of traditional universities, and the power relations between professors and students. They considered rigid sequential curricula and exams as barriers for working-class youth, so they initiated experiments to implement the idea of accessible, liberating knowledge. One such experiment was people's universities, which these youth had unlimited access to, and where they studied without strict curricula and exams. Other experiments included peer-to-peer learning groups (mainly for Marxism studies) in factories and public organizations, open lectures by famous scientists for workers and soldiers, and a communist academy.

The traditional universities were also affected by experiments with the formats and organization of higher learning, and with attempts to eliminate traditional power relations in academia. The Bolsheviks insisted that professors and students should be equal. Thus, in some universities, exams were eliminated as an exercise in power. In addition to such reforms, students could choose courses freely. New leaders also experimented with collective learning and peer-to-peer learning within the traditional university setting and introduced mandatory social service practices for professors and students.

Another experiment that partially survived was what we today call "part-time education." In other words, part-time study by working students. This experiment came from attempts to find effective combinations of study and work. Later, it enabled the development of the largest system of part-time education in the world and education approaches that were connected to specific enterprises. Some of these experiments lasted until the early 1930s. Prominent scholar and education reformer John Dewey wrote admiring words about these experiments in his 1929 book, *Impressions of Soviet Russia and the Revolutionary World*, in which he stated, "The Russian educational situation is enough to convert one to the idea that only in a society based upon the cooperative principle can the ideals of educational reformers be adequately carried into operation."<sup>5</sup> However, most of these experiments failed. The institutional arrangements were not stable, and they

faced troubles with scaling in both the socioeconomic conditions and the new political regime that developed during Joseph Stalin's period of leading the Soviet Union (1924–1953).

Later, Lenin (and subsequently Stalin) realized that they could and should use the traditional machinery of higher education for their own purposes. Therefore, the idea of keeping elements of traditional university organization – such as rigid curricula, exams, and distance between professors and students – was not a part of the socialist model. This organizational model won partly because of its inertia despite the dramatic changes happening outside of it. Lenin made it very clear in a speech delivered at the Third All-Russia Congress of The Russian Young Communist League in 1920: “It is said that the old school was a school of purely book knowledge, of ceaseless drilling and grinding. That is true, but we must distinguish between what was bad in the old schools and what is useful to us, and we must be able to select from it what is necessary for communism.”<sup>6</sup> How have the higher-education institutions evolved in this dialectical process between socialist ideas of higher education, the hierarchical education models inherited from Europe, and the Soviet government's use of these stratified models to build their own hierarchical version of socialist society?

**I**n 1990, over twelve million students attended universities in socialist countries that had similar higher-education systems based on the fundamental ideas discussed above, with minimal variation. This could be explained by the centralized system of national control behind the Soviet Union's state organization, and the consistent model of higher education that emerged from early Soviet trial and error with education reform. At the time, many “first world” countries allied with the Western Bloc (led by the United States) – and “third world” countries neutral to both the Western and Eastern Bloc (led by the Soviet Union) – implemented some elements of this revised model, sometimes without reference. The main practical characteristics of this later system in relation to the founding principles of the socialist model follow education as a public good, free and equal access to instruction, and class-based education approaches.

The idea of higher education as an exclusively public good transformed into the idea of higher education as a state good, since, in the socialist society, everything public was controlled and owned by the socialist state. For example, the owner of the university was not the people-nation-public but the state. This is one of the striking paradoxes of the disconnect between discussion and implementation. In discussion, Lenin proposed theoretical ideas about the elimination of the state, and the transfer of power to the masses that would destroy the separation between governors and the governed. However, in implementation, Lenin's ideas and Marxist interpretations of them considered the Soviet Union as the state and as an all-embracing institution.<sup>7</sup>

This initial idea of higher education as a public good was entrenched in the United States and Europe in the nineteenth century via U.S. land-grant universities and the Humboldtian model of higher education, whose core idea is a holistic combination of research and studies. American state universities were supposed to be accessible to everyone. The state owned these universities and funded them, resulting in low tuition costs for students. Therefore, the important condition for implementing these ideas was the principle that higher education should be provided by the state, leaving no space for private education. This had powerful consequences such as making the higher-education system a part of the state bureaucracy. By contrast, in the Soviet Union, this idea was implemented in two additional directions.

In the first direction, higher education became a machine that produced manpower for the socialist economy. Lenin's government quickly realized the importance of specialized skills and knowledge for successful industrial development. Since he viewed socialism as one unified factory, he also saw skills development as the sector in the factory responsible for manpower production. In letters and resolutions, he stressed education as a source of productivity increase.<sup>8</sup> Thus universities, following this approach, had to become part of the socialist production machine and develop useful skills and knowledge within their students. The Bolsheviks predicted the idea of human capital, strongly believing that it should be nationalized. The state, for instance, could plan how many people it should prepare for different economic sectors because the socialist plan was not just about the number of cars to be assembled, but also about the number of engineers to prepare for such specific jobs. This vocational approach was inspired by the idea of labor division as a universal perspective in all spheres of life.

In the greater mechanism of the state economy, each student was seen as a cog with highly specialized skills, which was achieved through specialized training for specific jobs, and rapid response to technological innovations. The Soviet government easily created new universities to respond to changing needs. For example, during the Cold War arms race, universities were established for the nuclear and space industries. This system not only created a supply of skilled workers but also matched them with employer demand through state economic planning and mandatory job placement, providing guaranteed employment and relatively high training efficiency. Specialized training also required a curriculum that was meticulous and focused, but this narrowly specialized character of higher education was not a feature by itself – it was a logical consequence of the idea to prepare people for very specific jobs.

At the same time, narrowly specialized training could not be called “vocational,” as stated by many sources in the literature. The graduates had extensive training in Marxist humanities, as well as mandatory foreign language and physical education classes during their first three years of study. In the 1930s, the growth

of this narrow system was fortified by the creation of specialized institutes, as well as the separation of such institutes from large multidisciplinary universities. Even agricultural universities could be divided into specific higher-education institutions of livestock, milk technologies, grain production, and so on. In the post-socialist countries of Central and Eastern Europe, specialized institutions have largely become multidisciplinary universities and have been placed under the control of these countries' education ministries.<sup>9</sup>

Some features of specialized higher education were typical for countries going through an industrial revolution. Just as land-grant universities did in the late nineteenth century in the United States, Soviet polytechnic universities, agricultural, engineering, and pedagogical institutions, provided infrastructure for rapid human capital development to meet the needs of growing industries. We must not forget about the territorial and geographical features of this education approach either, seeing as the task of developing the territory for academic institutions was no less acute. Universities acted as part of the standard infrastructure of new cities, along with hospitals, kindergartens, and libraries. The peculiarity of the Soviet project was that these investments were purely state owned, in contrast to initiatives that were implemented in the Russian Empire and other countries with opportunities for large private investments and public-private partnerships. For example, The National Research Tomsk State University (known as Tomsk University during the Soviet era) was established by Russian Emperor Alexander II in 1878, with the support of private investments and other major funds from entrepreneurs, industrialists, businessmen, and local city councils.<sup>10</sup> A similar approach was used in other socialist countries where universities served as important drivers of territorial economic development.

In the second direction for implementing the idea of higher education as a public good, higher education became an engine driving the construction of a communist society. Lenin believed that the next generation would be free from capitalist memories and could therefore become the real driving force for the construction of communism, the new social order. He insisted that socialist universities should bridge the gap between life and practice:

One of the greatest evils and misfortunes left to us by the old, capitalist society is the complete rift between books and practical life . . . . That is why it would be most mistaken merely to assimilate book knowledge about communism. Without work and without struggle, book knowledge of communism obtained from communist pamphlets and works is absolutely worthless, for it would continue the old separation of theory and practice, the old rift, which was the most pernicious feature of the old, bourgeois society.<sup>11</sup>

The implementation of this task created probably the most important feature of the early socialist model: social activism, the "fourth mission" of universities.<sup>12</sup>

It was not just about the practical implementation of learned skills. It was about active transformation of the social and cultural environment. Students and professors became active preachers of the communist ideology; they participated in the creation of new proletarian culture, including political movements like early Soviet Vanguardism; and they helped workers and peasants in their practical tasks.

It is important to note that there were two distinct periods in the development of socialist higher education. The socialist model of the first developmental period emerged in the early days of the Soviet Union. Gramsci discussed the model and stressed that universities could become a major source of social transformation and cultural revolution, even in their traditional organizational structure.<sup>13</sup> This model assumed that the mission of the higher-education system is not the reproduction of an existing social order but the production of a new one. It had an emphasis on community outreach, creativity, and dynamism. In all socialist countries, higher education gradually entered its second developmental period when it became part of both the state and the party bureaucracy, fixed with the main task of reproducing existing socialist society. It made social activism formal, transforming political action into political obedience and conformity to reproduce the new party hierarchy.

**A**fter higher education as a public good, the second founding principle of the socialist model – free and equal access to education – had two directions for implementation. First, the Bolsheviks aimed to make higher education universally accessible and free but were unable to make it fully universal because access was primarily based on meritocratic selection with some exceptions. Despite this selectivity, it is notable that the Soviet Union and other socialist countries had higher university enrollment rates than many wealthy countries. In 1913, the Russian Empire had just sixty-three state and fifty-four private institutions of higher education. These were elite institutions with high tuition costs and around one hundred thousand students. In 1923, there were over two hundred eighty institutions with more than two hundred ten thousand students, and by 1940, there were eight hundred twenty institutions with eight hundred thousand students.

Second, the idea of fair access differed from that of equal access. Socialists believed that justice was fundamentally class-based and should account for initial inequalities, either through affirmative actions or additional support for students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. The Bolsheviks pioneered large-scale positive discrimination by implementing the idea of fair and wide access, which went hand in hand with negative discrimination against students from educated and wealthy classes. This access was broadly related to social engineering, deliberately supporting what would now be called first-generation college students. This system of affirmative action helped build a new social structure, as expressed by lyrics from “The Internationale,” an international anthem adopted by the Com-



munist Party: “He who was nothing will become everything!”<sup>14</sup> Positive discrimination provided opportunities for social mobility, gender equality, and the development of small ethnic groups.

Soviet leadership introduced not only many categories of quotas but also other instruments of educational support for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. These included grants for young people from working-class families who completed military service and went to university, as well as part-time and evening education for working students that became a popular form of instruction. Combined with a regulated labor market, these measures had a strong and lasting impact. By 1930, around 34 percent of students in institutions of higher education came from working and peasant families. By 1950, the figure increased to 66 percent, with women accounting for about 42 percent of students in higher education.

It is important to note that the process of social engineering not only employed positive discrimination but also involved dramatic negative discrimination against students who belonged to overeducated groups, such as children from bourgeois families in the 1920s and 1930s or Jewish students from the 1950s through the 1970s. All socialist countries used different forms of affirmative action to achieve better representation for underrepresented groups – for instance, students from rural areas in China, the Romani populations in Eastern Europe, or the Afro-Cuban population in Cuba. Many universities had special officers (now known as diversity officers) who controlled admission and educational support measures for such students.

A class-based education approach, the third founding principle of the socialist model, meant that higher education should not only train qualified specialists but also produce leaders, elites, and people with coherent ideological values. In other words, the “new Soviet person.” This led to two radical and practical innovations in defining higher-education objectives. The first innovation was that all graduates should be equipped with deep knowledge of Marxism. The second was that all graduates should become highly moral people focused on the collective good. These two innovative objectives were interconnected but different, with the former being about knowledge and the latter being about attitudes and values. They were also critical parts of the Soviet nation-building process in territories with extremely diverse populations in terms of culture, language, and history. Higher-education institutions played an important role in promoting a universal curriculum and common approaches to the educational process.

To return to the first objective, becoming expert Marxists required a deep dive into Marxism. Universities never agreed to call this process indoctrination, as Marxists considered Marxism a science rather than a doctrine to memorize or believe. As such, Marxism-Leninism courses were integrated into the mandatory curriculum for all fields of study, taking up 10 to 20 percent of learning time. These

courses were given high academic status and combined in a logical sequence, with a typical set including topics such as “History of the Communist Party” and “Scientific Atheism” in the first year, “Dialectical and Historical Materialism” in the second year, “Marxist Political Economy” in the third year, and “Scientific Communism” in the fourth year. The syllabi for these courses were developed centrally in Moscow Communist Party institutes and became dogma, with professors required to follow them precisely. The teaching of Marxism in courses lacked any element of questioning and doubt, focusing instead on memorizing ideological texts, rewriting them, and reproducing correct interpretations and accepted quotations. This learning method made Marxism more like a religious cult than a philosophical doctrine. No studies have been conducted on the efficacy of such mandatory scientific training in Marxism, but one can assume that it was low. For instance, millions of those who studied scientific atheism eventually joined traditional religions after the collapse of socialism.

Concerning the formation of a new Soviet person, the second objective of Soviet higher education, universities became responsible for actively engaging students through extracurricular activities – namely, amateur theater, arts, and sport activities, as well as community service (known today as service-learning). The primary mission of these activities was to develop the importance of collective action. Ninety-nine percent of students were members of the All-Union Leninist Young Communist League, also known as the *Komsomol*, a political youth organization sometimes described as the youth division of the Communist Party, despite its independent status. In addition, each university had a committee that wielded a strong voice and independent resources toward students’ collective, political action. These committees supported student initiatives, as long as they did not contradict the dominant ideology and norms. They also conducted annual evaluations of students’ moral stance and social engagement.

It is worth noting that the hidden curriculum embedded in the Soviet education model influenced the formation of this new Soviet personality, creating someone who gained the right to work, who accepted the universality of individual educational and professional trajectories, and who succumbed to the illusion that those trajectories were being planned and optimized at the national level. Though the learning plans for each field of study were standardized, their large class workloads and limited independent work provided no room for students to make valuable educational and life choices. And while these plans also maintained the illusion of providing an optimal personal track toward postgraduate success, they denied individual responsibility and agency. In exchange for students’ transferring the rights to their personal educational choices, the state guaranteed them societal success through their chosen trajectory, which was centered on the ability and right to work. Therefore, during the second period of implementing the socialist model, an era that emphasized societal reproduction and the objective of

forming a new Soviet person, the idea of creating a socially active, collectivist person turned into training young students for hypocrisy and obedience.

These new socialist elements in educational objectives and the educational process led to specific organizational features of universities. Western researchers studying socialist higher education often emphasized severe limitations on academic freedom within this model, and this is correct. However, it is important to stress that this was a logical consequence of the entire model. These limitations did not affect freedom of research in the natural sciences, medicine, or engineering after Stalin's governance. They limited political freedoms but did not stop scientific discussions if they avoided Marxist dogmas. Moreover, universities had more intellectual freedom than other organizations. For example, professors and students had access to modern art and books authorized only for science libraries. Even in Marxist disciplines, the principles of scientific rigor and academic honesty exercised by natural science and engineering communities positively influenced the culture of higher education.

The role of the Communist Party and the Komsomol in socialist higher education was quite complex. These two organizations existed not just for ideological control but also provided some degree of pluralism and debate within the executive hierarchy. Socialist universities had a dual-governance model in which the senior executive (rector or president) had significant power and was subordinate to the government's minister of higher education. At the same time, the Communist Party secretary was independent and coregulated many aspects of university life, including personnel policies. He had a completely different line of command in the territorial party committee, compared to the rector who was a member of the university party committee. These executives had complex relationships that often led to conflicts, as well as some discussions that replaced the classical form of shared governance.

When the USSR collapsed in the early 1990s, the former Soviet republics and countries of the socialist bloc in Europe faced not only newfound freedom, but also the resulting consequences of poverty, loosely coupled governance, and painful breaks in social order and social perception of justice. Though many layers of Soviet-era institutional structures and organizations fell off from higher education during this time, many also remained.<sup>15</sup> Two examples among the layers that did not survive are coherent ideological education and formative moral education. Case studies such as Turkmenistan showed how Marxist courses were easily replaced by new ideologies formulated in postsocialist works like *Ruhnama*, a two-volume work written by one of the country's former presidents, Saparmurat Niyazov, that served as a tool of state propaganda and cultural history.<sup>16</sup> Through cases such as this, the idea of higher education as a driving force for constructing new societies became clear. In other former constituent countries, new

universities were established to support the new aims of socioeconomic development, namely training new national bureaucracies, diplomatic corps, academics, and other professionals. By the mid-2000s, universities had received more attention from the state and large private establishments. In the decades since, universities have become part of national state-building strategies that treat higher-education institutions as drivers of their global enterprise and large-scale initiatives for competitive excellence.

Throughout these postsocialist developments, the perception of higher education as a public or state good has remained crucial. Current Russian higher education presents an interesting case in the duality of practical approaches, as seen in the binary of tuition-based admissions (a private marketized good), compared with tuition-free admissions (a relative public good). The opening of private education institutions made it possible, almost universally, to increase participation in higher-education systems. Affirmative action measures have also survived in a drastically decreased form. While societies experienced increasing inequality in the distribution of economic capital, merit-based access to higher education became a dominant source of equality, reflecting the idea of new fairness by rarely considering the socioeconomic background of applicants' families.

Although the labor market changed dramatically and the plan system of standardized study was abandoned, the idea of strong links between universities and the labor market persisted, even after the collapse of the socialist system. However, even in nonsocialist countries, the connections between labor markets and universities to graduates' employability persist as key policy issues, to ensure universities provide markets with a steady supply of graduates who are equipped with the specific skills demanded by today's employers. Toward this aim, some former Soviet countries have introduced mandatory job placement for students trained at the expense of state funding. Even more formerly constituent countries are trying to improve graduates' employment through organized contacts (usually in the form of contracts) with industries, while bachelor's and master's programs, as well as education in private universities, have supported students' flexibility within their educational and professional trajectories. The neighboring Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania recently succeeded in national reforms to higher education and curricula.<sup>17</sup> However, the specialized curriculum is still strong, preparing graduates for specific skills-based jobs with limited variability and choice.

**W**e believe that the main lesson from our study of the socialist education model is the risk of totalitarianism demonstrated by the history this essay reconstructed, a history in which humanistic dreams about perfect universities in a perfect society transformed over time. As soon as high social objectives became mandatory for everyone, the energy and initiative to re-

alize such objectives were focused on social control, pressure, and reproduction, rather than on the production of a new social order. The expansion of mandatory values in Soviet-era universities (and any university system by extension) also created power struggles instead of meaningful discussions and free individual choice. At the same time, some ideas and elements of the socialist model were actively used in nonsocialist countries, both prior to and following the collapse of the USSR. Many of them are still good sources for the invention of effective social and educational instruments that improve higher-education systems.

The reconstructed history and path-dependence analysis that guided this essay also highlight the development of universities as drivers of economic growth. This view became quite popular in many countries that aligned the supply of skilled students from universities with the demands of employers in the labor market. We noted the growing discourse of employability as an important outcome of higher education, along with mechanisms piloted in socialist countries, like industrial practice and early employment contracts, which could be used in different economic settings. The idea of having specialized universities for fast-growing sectors of the economy in developing countries proved to be effective then and can be used more widely now, as universities worldwide continue to work as drivers of social and cultural transformation. We see many elements today of social mobilization, for example, in universities that include the green agenda and social sustainability in their missions.<sup>18</sup>

The socialist model has played its role in higher education and was attractive due to its promotion of founding principles like free and equal access. In current times, many countries have outperformed early socialist experiments with the expansion of their higher-education systems. Nordic countries are a good example of higher-education systems with high rates of participation. They are also closer than other countries to the ideal society theorized by early utopian socialists.<sup>19</sup> At the same time, many countries elsewhere struggle with expanding public provision of higher education, but we think some ideas and approaches from the socialist model could help. Take the rapid scale-up of online higher education, for instance. Perhaps the early stages of the comparably rapid growth of higher-education systems in socialist countries could be used as a blueprint for expanding online education. At present, that expansion is mostly driven by fee-based programs. However, with fair scaling, it could become a great force for democratizing access to higher education.

Large-scale affirmative actions in Western nations, states, and countries were an obvious response to the socialist model's principle of fair access. Today, these actions exist in many countries around the world where they continue to support social mobility. Still, the practical experience of having socialist systems reinforce social mobility (through targeted access to higher education) suggests that we must take a deeper look at not just the entrance to university, but at success after

enrollment. Different instruments of enriching nontraditional students' higher-education capital could be used to increase the effectiveness of the fair-access system.<sup>20</sup>

The Marxist idea to teach liberating knowledge at universities became quite popular in the second half of the twentieth century, especially in postcolonial countries, but we think the lesson this idea imparted is more negative. A class-based approach to teaching, the last founding principle of the socialist model, easily became an instrument for indoctrination and limiting free thought. But there was an upside in the idea that universities should engage in formative education aimed at students' personal development, which also supports discovery of their sense of purpose within a collectivist framework. In the first quarter of the twenty-first century, this idea is becoming more popular again, with some researchers recommending deeper study of topics like the creation of Chinese collectivist values, since most Chinese scholars in the field of higher education have found interesting connections between Marxist and Confucian ideas. We think, overall, that the socialist experiments discussed in this essay show how risky and complex the field of value education is. However, we can always learn more about the socialists' attempts to connect higher education and the real world in ways that inspired reformists like John Dewey a century ago.

---

#### AUTHORS' NOTE

The authors of this essay had firsthand encounters with the socialist model of higher education. One of them is a direct product of its implementation during the Soviet era; the other studied at a post-Soviet university that was both on the Soviet path and trying to overcome it. The authors' dialogue within this essay supported an attempt to separate personal impressions from the objective picture. In doing so, it became clear that socialist ideas concerning education, and practical attempts to implement them, deserve to play a role in the discussion of the evolution of higher education in the world.

#### ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**Isak Frumin** is the Head of the Observatory of Innovations in Higher Education at Constructor University, Professor in the Department of Higher Education Research at the University for Continuing Education Krems, and the Founder and former Director of the Institute of Education at HSE University (National Research University Higher School of Economics) in Moscow. He is the author of more than two hundred publications and recently edited *Building Research Capacity at Universities: Insights from Post-Soviet Countries* (with Maia Chankseliani and Igor Fedjukin, 2022).

**Daria Platonova** is a Senior Lecturer and Senior Research Fellow in the Institute of Education at HSE University (National Research University Higher School of Economics) in Moscow, where she also serves as the Executive Editor of its academic journal, *Educational Studies (Moscow)*. She is the editor of *Assessing the Contributions of Higher Education: Knowledge for a Disordered World* (with Simon Margison, Brendan Cantwell, and Anna Smolentseva, 2023) and has published in journals such as *Tertiary Education and Management*, *Higher Education Policy*, and *International Transactions in Operational Research*.

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Claude-Henri de Rouvroy, comte de Saint-Simon, *Nouveau Christianisme – Dialogues entre un Conservateur et un Novateur* [New Christianity–Dialogues between a Conservative and an Innovator] (Paris: Bossange Père, Auguste Sautet et Cie, 1825).
- <sup>2</sup> Friedrich Engels, “Principles of Communism,” in *Marx/Engels Collected Works*, Volume 6 (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1976), 299.
- <sup>3</sup> Karl Marx, “The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte,” trans. Daniel De Leon (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr & Company, 1913), 27.
- <sup>4</sup> Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology*, ed. C. J. Arthur (New York: International Publishers, [1846] 1947), 64.
- <sup>5</sup> John Dewey, *Impressions of Soviet Russia and the Revolutionary World* (New York: New Republic, 1929), 86.
- <sup>6</sup> Vladimir Lenin, “Speech Delivered at the Third All-Russia Congress of The Russian Young Communist League,” in *The Tasks of the Youth Leagues* (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1951), <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1920/oct/02.htm>.
- <sup>7</sup> Martin Carnoy, *The State and Political Theory* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1984), 153–163.
- <sup>8</sup> Vladimir Lenin, *O Vospitanii i Obrazovanii* [About Upbringing and Education] (Moscow: Prosveshchenie, 1973).
- <sup>9</sup> Jeroen Huisman, Anna Smolentseva, and Isak Froumin, *25 Years of Transformations of Higher Education Systems in Post-Soviet Countries: Reform and Continuity* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, Cham, 2018).
- <sup>10</sup> Elena Feoktistova, “Historical Moment: Opening of the University,” [in Russian] Redvix Media LLC, August 3, 2014, <https://news.vtomske.ru/news/87473-istoricheskii-moment-otkrytie-universiteta> (accessed March 6, 2024).
- <sup>11</sup> Lenin, “Speech Delivered at the Third All-Russia Congress of The Russian Young Communist League.”
- <sup>12</sup> The three widely accepted missions of higher education are training, research, and service.
- <sup>13</sup> Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, ed. and trans. Quentin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1971).
- <sup>14</sup> Eugène Pottier, “L’Internationale” [The Internationale], Boldoduc (Lille), [1871] 1888, sheet music. Literal English translation provided by the authors.

- <sup>15</sup> Huisman, Smolentseva, and Froumin, *25 Years of Transformations of Higher Education Systems in Post-Soviet Countries*.
- <sup>16</sup> Saparmurat Niyazov, *Ruhnama: The Book of the Soul*, annotated by Andrew S. Edwards (Seattle, Wash.: Kindle Direct Publishing, 2015).
- <sup>17</sup> European Commission, “National Reforms in Higher Education,” November 27, 2023, <https://eurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-education-systems/estonia/national-reforms-higher-education>.
- <sup>18</sup> Brendan Cantwell, Simon Marginson, and Anna Smolentseva, *High Participation Systems of Higher Education* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).
- <sup>19</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>20</sup> Stanton Wortham, Renata Love-Jones, William Peters, et al., “Educating for Comprehensive Well-Being,” *ECNU Review of Education* 3 (3) (2020): 406–436, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2096531120928448>.