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Between the Systemic Revolution and the Stagnation of Structures: The Evolution of University Identity in a Technological Era

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Abstract: The establishment of the University of Opole in 1994 marked a pivotal moment in Polish higher education, symbolizing a shift from ideological control to intellectual autonomy. This article examines the broader implications of university evolution in an era where technology increasingly dictates academic priorities. Historically, universities balanced humanistic inquiry with scientific progress, yet today, they face existential challenges as private institutions dominate research.

The article explores how the University of Opole's post-communist transformation parallels modern struggles between institutional stagnation and technological disruption. The marginalization of the humanities, once enforced by political regimes, is now driven by technological determinism, raising critical questions about the role of philosophy, ethics, and spirituality in academia. The rise of neurofeedback and biofeedback technologies as substitutes for traditional theological reflection further underscores this shift.

Additionally, universities now contend with corporate research institutions, which, armed with financial and technological superiority, redefine knowledge production. This article argues that unless universities reclaim their role as centers of ethical and interdisciplinary inquiry, they risk obsolescence. The University of Opole's experience serves as a case study for understanding how academic institutions must navigate ideological and technological shifts to maintain their relevance.

Ultimately, the future of universities hinges on their ability to integrate scientific advancement with humanistic reflection. Will they remain spaces of critical inquiry, or will they become mere training grounds for technological industries? This question defines the evolving identity of the modern university in the digital age.

Keywords: University of Opole, University Identity, academic priorities in a Technological Era

Introduction

The establishment of the University of Opole on March 10, 1994, marked a critical turning point in Polish higher education. As the first university founded after the collapse of communism in 1989, it was not just an academic institution but a symbol of Poland's transition from ideological control to intellectual autonomy. The creation of this university resulted from merging the Higher Pedagogical School with the Theological and Pastoral Institute, integrating secular and religious traditions in a way that mirrored broader global debates on the place of humanistic and spiritual reflection in technologically advancing societies.

The University of Opole was established as the 12th university of its kind in Poland, and significantly, it was the first new university created after the end of communist rule. The formation of this institution was made possible through the merger of the Higher Pedagogical School and the Theological and Pastoral Institute, a branch of the Catholic University of Lublin. Neither of these institutions had a long tradition in Opole. The Higher Pedagogical School was initially established in Wrocław in 1950, before being relocated to Opole in 1954 (see Grobelny, 1970; Reiner, 1977). The Theological and Pastoral Institute, on the other hand, was part of the Catholic University in Lublin, founded in 1918, immediately after Poland regained independence following over a century of partitions that had erased the nation from the map of Europe.

This combination was significant mainly because the two colleges had completely different traditions. The Higher Pedagogical School in Opole was one of the post-war universities where education and the ideological indoctrination of students were closely linked. This is exemplified by the histories of similar institutions in Katowice, Silesia, and Gdańsk. The pedagogical school in Katowice merged with the local branch of the Jagiellonian University in 1968, forming a separate academic entity. Two years later, the Higher Pedagogical School in Gdańsk was granted university status after merging with the University of Economics. By 1972, within the borders of post-war Poland, three more pedagogical schools—Opole, Kraków, and Rzeszów—were training students at the master's level.

The institutional landscape of Polish higher education continued to evolve with the implementation of the *Teacher's Charter of Rights and Responsibilities* (Pol. *Karta Praw Nauczyciela*) in 1972, which mandated that all teachers should be trained at the higher (master's) level. Consequently, between 1973 and 1974, additional pedagogical institutions were established based on existing schools (see Jarowiecki, 1983). After 1989, many of these universities were incorporated into larger institutions or became the foundations for new academic centers in Poland.

Currently, Poland has 43 public universities, 18 of which are supervised by the Minister of Higher Education. This same minister also oversees four economic universities, three pedagogical universities, five agricultural universities, and two technical universities. Additionally, two universities are classified as art colleges and fall under the jurisdiction of the Minister of Culture and National Heritage. Nine medical universities, categorized as medical colleges, are overseen by the Minister of Public Health. In addition to public institutions, Poland has two notable non-public universities: the John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin and the SWPS University of Social Sciences and Humanities in Warsaw.

The University of Opole, therefore, represents both a continuation and a break from Poland's academic tradition. It was founded in response to historical and political pressures but also as a realization of long-standing aspirations for a higher education institution in the region. These aspirations date back to the 16th century when Prince Brzeski, George II the Magnificent, attempted to establish the Piast University in Brzeg. Similar efforts were made in the 17th century by Prince Bishop Charles of Habsburg, who planned for an academic institution near Opole. Another example of such aspirations was the Agricultural Academy in Pruszków (*Landwirtschaftliche Akademie Proskau*), a Prussian and later German school that operated between 1847 and 1881.

The shifting demographic landscape following World War II further shaped the academic development of Opole. Cities such as Opole, Wrocław, Brzeg, and Nysa were incorporated into Poland as part of the so-called "recovered lands" (Pol. *ziemie odzyskne*), leading to significant population displacements. Many Polish settlers, who had been expelled from territories annexed by

the Soviet Union, resettled in these areas. The migration of faculty members from the University of Lviv to Wrocław further influenced Polish academia, allowing the University of Wrocław to position itself as an intellectual successor to one of Poland's pre-war academic powerhouses.

The founding of the University of Opole was also influenced by the suppression of theological faculties by the communist regime. After 1954, theological studies were systematically removed from public universities, including the University of Wrocław. Many displaced theology professors relocated to the seminary in Nysa or the Theological and Pastoral Institute in Opole. As a result, institutions such as the Catholic University of Lublin remained some of the few centers for theological and philosophical studies under communist rule. Figures such as Karol Wojtyła—later Pope John Paul II—taught at the Catholic University of Lublin, reinforcing the importance of independent academic spaces in maintaining intellectual traditions.

With this complex historical background, the establishment of the University of Opole was not just an academic initiative but also a symbolic gesture. It reflected Poland's transition to a democratic society, free from ideological restrictions. However, the university also inherited challenges from its predecessors, particularly in navigating the ideological divisions between secular and religious academic traditions. These tensions, alongside the broader evolution of global academia, continue to shape the university's trajectory in the 21st century.

The Specificity of the Higher Pedagogical School in Opole

The Higher Pedagogical School in Opole, although one of the best in its category, had a bad reputation in the communist era as a meeting place for representatives of the communist party and the security service, or other law enforcement services, particularly involved in the policy best articulated in the slogan expression “strengthening the people’s power in Poland” (Pol. *umacnianie władzy ludowej w Polsce*). In addition, within its walls, diplomas were obtained

not only by the aforementioned representatives of the security services but also by members of the communist authority who performed various functions in the state administration.

On the other hand, the Theological and Pastoral Institute, as a branch of the Catholic University in Lublin, represented the only non-public university in Poland and, therefore, remained independent, due to the fact that it was financed exclusively by the Catholic Church. As a result, it was the only fully independent and Catholic university existing in the entire Soviet bloc, where communist governments fully controlled all levels of education. Within this free university, Marxist ideas were never taught as a foundation for education, which stood in sharp contrast to other state-controlled institutions, where the Polish United Worker's Party imposed its ideological model of education.

Throughout the communist period in Poland, the Catholic University of Lublin also provided refuge for students expelled from public universities due to their political, religious, or ideological beliefs. Because of this, it became a frequent target of state repression, particularly during the 1950s and 1960s. Measures taken against the university included the banning of the Faculty of Law and Social and Pedagogical Sciences (1953–1956), economic pressures to lure professors away to state institutions, and the systematic expulsion of faculty members. Severe censorship was imposed on university publications, and books deemed anti-communist or anti-socialist were removed from library collections. Additionally, the institution was under constant surveillance by the secret services of the Security Office (see Gałaszewska-Chilczuk, 2013). Despite these efforts, the university remained open, becoming a symbol of academic freedom and resistance.

Given these starkly different institutional backgrounds, the merger of the Higher Pedagogical School and the Theological and Pastoral Institute to form the University of Opole was far from straightforward. However, political and social factors made Opole a particularly favorable site for establishing the first university in free Poland. The decision was further reinforced by Poland's full liberation from Soviet influence in 1993, when the last Russian soldier crossed the country's borders, marking the official end of the communist era.

Local aspirations also played a significant role in the university's foundation. The region had long sought to establish an academic institution, with historical

attempts dating back to the 16th century when Prince Brzeski, George II the Magnificent, attempted to establish the Piast University in Brzeg. Similar efforts were made in the 17th century by Prince Bishop Charles of Habsburg. The region also had a history of academic development with the Agricultural Academy in Pruszków (*Landwirtschaftliche Akademie Proskau*), a Prussian and later German school that operated near Opole from 1847 to 1881 (see Nicieja, 2005).

However, the region's demographic landscape underwent significant changes following World War II. Cities such as Opole, Wrocław, Brzeg, and Nysa were incorporated into Polish borders as part of the so-called recovered lands, resulting in mass population shifts. Polish settlers, many of whom had been displaced from territories annexed by the Soviet Union, replaced the previous German-speaking population. This migration also had a profound academic impact, as faculty from the University of Lviv relocated to Wrocław, allowing the University of Wrocław to position itself as an intellectual successor to one of Poland's pre-war academic powerhouses.

A key factor in the University of Opole's formation was the historical suppression of theological faculties by the communist regime. After 1954, theological studies were systematically removed from universities, including the University of Wrocław. Many displaced theology professors found positions at the seminary in Nysa or the Theological and Pastoral Institute in Opole. As a result, institutions such as the Catholic University of Lublin remained some of the few centers for theological and philosophical studies under communist rule. Figures such as Karol Wojtyła—later Pope John Paul II—taught at the Catholic University of Lublin, reinforcing the importance of independent academic spaces in maintaining intellectual traditions.

Due to the indigenous population living in the area of the present Opolskie Voivodeship, who was not resettled to Germany after World War II and is now partially identified as a German minority, the fact that the nationality issue played an important role in the establishment of a new university in Opole is not publicized. In this context, the actions of Alfons Nossol, bishop of the Opole diocese, established only in 1974 due to the post-war conflict over the administrative division of the Catholic Church in the territories belonging

to Germany before 1945, were significant. Alfons Nossol, who descended from a family of Silesian Germans, was at the same time a lecturer at the Catholic University of Lublin and involved all his authority in the creation of the university, persuading the Polish authorities to support this initiative (see Nowakowska, 2012). In these activities, however, he used not only his position in the church or academic hierarchy but also his close relations with Germany, and especially with the universities operating in the area. Thus, he used the argument that the law that would apply to Poland in the future, striving to tighten relations with Western Europe, would lead to granting students permission to study in the reunited Germany, or it might allow the establishment of a branch of one of the German universities. These arguments, apart from those closely related to the potential inherent in the scientific community of Opole, must have appealed to the authorities, since despite the reluctance of the academic community in Poland, fearing the creation of another university, on October 1, 1994, a new Athenaeum was launched on the map of Poland. In the foundation act, it was emphasized that the employees of the Pedagogical University and the Theological and Pastoral Institute automatically become employees of the new academic body.

The reluctance to sever ties with former regime-affiliated academics resulted in a prolonged period of institutional stagnation. Many of these individuals remained in influential positions, shaping the academic culture of the university. This situation only began to change with generational turnover and the gradual retirement of compromised figures. Nonetheless, the legacy of these early compromises continues to influence the university's governance and academic priorities today.

This evolving academic landscape has raised fundamental questions about the university's broader identity. As traditional structures fade and new academic paradigms emerge, institutions must navigate not only their historical legacy but also their role in contemporary knowledge production. One of the more intriguing dimensions of this transformation is how universities reconcile longstanding theological traditions with the rapid rise of scientific and technological advancements. Balancing these influences will be crucial in shaping the University of Opole's role in the future of higher education.

The Changing Landscape of Academia: Spirituality, Technology, and Corporate Dominance

A particularly intriguing aspect of contemporary academia is the emergence of technology-driven spirituality. The rise of neurofeedback, mindfulness applications, and other biofeedback technologies as modern substitutes for traditional spiritual experiences reflects a profound shift from classical theological reflections on human existence to a physiological understanding of spirituality, where bodily states replace metaphysical contemplation (Gruzelier, 2014; Marzbani et al., 2016). Universities today are increasingly shifting their focus from truth and virtue to well-being and cognitive optimization, raising the question: Is this an expansion of spiritual understanding or a reduction of spirituality to mere biological processes?

This technological redefinition of spirituality reflects broader societal trends that prioritize empirical validation over metaphysical speculation. Practices once considered deeply personal or religious, such as meditation or prayer, are now studied through the lens of neuroscience, with researchers mapping brain activity and correlating it with subjective experiences of transcendence. While this shift enables a deeper scientific understanding of states traditionally associated with enlightenment or inner peace, it also risks stripping spirituality of its existential and theological dimensions. When the experience of the divine or the sacred is reduced to mere neuronal patterns, the question arises: does spirituality retain its essence, or does it become another function of the human brain to be optimized and enhanced like memory or attention?

Furthermore, the commercialization of spirituality through technology-driven solutions introduces ethical concerns about accessibility, authenticity, and the commodification of inner experiences. Many of these advancements are packaged as consumer products, with mindfulness apps, biofeedback headsets, and brainwave-enhancing devices promising users a shortcut to personal enlightenment. This stands in stark contrast to the traditional notion of spiritual growth as a lifelong, deeply introspective journey. By framing well-being and cognitive enhancement as primary goals, technology-driven spirituality risks catering primarily to a privileged demographic while excluding those who lack

access to such resources. In doing so, it may reinforce a consumerist approach to self-improvement rather than fostering a genuine search for meaning.

At the same time, universities are facing growing competition from private research institutions that dominate technological advancements. Just as Polish universities once struggled under communist control, they now struggle against corporate research powerhouses with vast financial resources and cutting-edge facilities. The University of Opole's struggles in its formative years demonstrate that academic institutions are most vulnerable when they lack autonomy and a clear mission. Unless universities reclaim their role as centers of ethical, philosophical, and interdisciplinary inquiry, they risk becoming obsolete in the shadow of Silicon Valley's research dominance.

The Evolution of Academic Identity in a Digital Age

As universities navigate the growing influence of technology-driven spirituality, they simultaneously face an equally significant challenge—the rising dominance of private research institutions in shaping technological advancements. Once regarded as the primary centers for knowledge creation and dissemination, universities now find themselves competing with online learning platforms, artificial intelligence research, and corporate innovation hubs that often outpace traditional academic institutions in both funding and technological progress. This shifting landscape compels universities to rethink their role, not only as educators but also as pioneers of interdisciplinary research, ethical inquiry, and intellectual leadership in an increasingly digital world.

For the University of Opole, the legacy of its founding institutions continues to shape its academic structure. Initially, the university prioritized teacher training, reflecting the pedagogical focus of the former Higher Pedagogical School. This emphasis on didactics persisted for years, with scientific research playing a secondary role. Many of the university's early faculty members had not pursued their academic training at research universities, reinforcing a culture that valued teaching over research.

This imbalance limited the institution's ability to develop a robust research profile. For many years, academic departments were managed by the same individuals, some holding their positions for over two decades. This lack of turnover contributed to stagnation, making it difficult to establish dynamic research teams or secure external funding. In response, the university introduced a new statute in 2019, aimed at shifting the balance toward research-driven development. These reforms emphasize the importance of faculty publications in prestigious journals, participation in international academic collaborations, and the establishment of interdisciplinary research initiatives.

Despite these challenges, the University of Opole has made significant strides. The institution was among the select Polish universities to participate in the European Commission's "European Universities" initiative, a prestigious program funded by Erasmus+. This recognition underscores the university's growing research ambitions and its potential to integrate into the broader European academic landscape.

The expansion of faculties over the years also reflects the university's ongoing transformation. What began in 1994 with just five faculties has since grown to twelve, covering a broad range of disciplines, including medicine, political science, and social communication. These changes demonstrate a concerted effort to diversify the academic offerings and strengthen the university's competitiveness in Poland's higher education landscape.

However, structural challenges remain. The prioritization of didactics over research has proven difficult to overcome, particularly within faculties that retain longstanding administrative figures resistant to change. Similar issues can be observed at the Opole University of Technology, which, like the University of Opole, evolved from a former technical school and continues to grapple with resistance to reform. Collaboration between these two institutions could foster a stronger, more competitive academic environment in the region, but institutional inertia remains a significant barrier.

Ultimately, the transformation of academic structures at the University of Opole illustrates the broader tension between tradition and innovation in higher education. As universities navigate the challenges posed by technological disruption, they must also confront internal limitations that hinder their capacity

for adaptation. The University of Opole's journey—from a pedagogically focused institution to an emerging research university—highlights the complexities of academic evolution in a rapidly changing world.

A Path Forward: Balancing Innovation and Tradition

To maintain their relevance in the 21st century, universities must strike a balance between innovation and tradition. While embracing technological advancements is necessary, it must not come at the cost of erasing the humanities, ethical studies, and interdisciplinary discourse that have long defined academia.

A well-rounded academic institution must be built upon a strong moral foundation, a principle reinforced by the experiences of Central and Eastern Europe. The post-communist transformation of higher education highlights the dangers of ideological control over universities and the consequences of reducing academic institutions to politically motivated entities. One of the greatest challenges facing Polish universities today is the tendency for the humanities to become overly ideologized, focusing on artificial problems generated by economically developed societies rather than drawing on the lessons of the past to prepare students for the future.

As Pope John Paul II noted:

Today much is said about Europe's Christian roots. If cathedrals, artwork, music, and literature are signs of them, in a certain sense they are eloquent in silence. Universities, on the other hand, can speak about them aloud. They can speak in the language of today, comprehensible to everyone. Yes, their voices might not be heard by those who are deafened by the ideology of the secularization of our Continent, but this does not dispense academics, faithful to historical truth, from the task of bearing witness through a sound examination of the secrets of knowledge and wisdom that have flourished in the fertile soil of Christianity (John Paul II, 2004).

This highlights the broader role of universities beyond mere knowledge transmission: they serve as custodians of historical truth and ethical discourse, capable of navigating the delicate balance between secular and theological perspectives. While theological faculties remain a contentious issue in certain academic environments—such as in Italy, where historical conflicts between the Church and the state led to the removal of theological departments—Poland presents a contrasting case. Here, Catholicism has been a unifying force in national identity, and its presence within academic institutions has played a role in shaping intellectual traditions.

A comparison with Germany further illustrates this contrast. In German universities, theological faculties exist without special privileges, functioning alongside other academic disciplines. In Poland, however, the elimination of theological faculties during the communist era remains a sensitive issue, as it was part of a broader effort to sever ties with Western cultural heritage. One particularly revealing example was the communist regime's attack on Latin education in Poland. Since Latin was historically tied to Western intellectual traditions, its removal from school curricula aimed to erode connections to pre-Soviet cultural and academic influences. The long-term consequences of this policy are still evident today, as the limited presence of Latin in university programs restricts access to classical literature, historical scholarship, and theological studies.

Given these historical lessons, universities must carefully navigate their role in shaping contemporary discourse. One approach is fostering stronger collaborations between technical disciplines and the humanities. Integrating ethical AI studies, philosophy of technology, and digital humanities into university curricula can help bridge the gap between technological progress and humanistic inquiry. Additionally, universities should leverage their unique position to serve as ethical watchdogs in an era dominated by corporate technological interests.

A key challenge in maintaining academic integrity is resisting ideological pressures that distort intellectual inquiry. The experiences of universities under communist rule provide a cautionary tale: when academic institutions become tools of political manipulation, their ability to seek truth and advance knowledge is compromised. Today, similar risks exist in the form of ideological agendas that

shape academic programs and research priorities. Universities must therefore reaffirm their commitment to intellectual independence by fostering open discourse and resisting the appropriation of academic spaces by ideological movements.

The transformation of universities in post-communist countries provides a unique perspective on the broader role of higher education. While Western universities often debate the balance between tradition and progress, post-communist institutions have a more immediate concern: rebuilding academic environments that were once heavily controlled by the state. This process involves not only revising curricula and research priorities but also re-establishing academic freedom as a fundamental principle.

Ultimately, breaking away from ideological constraints and reaffirming universities as spaces for critical inquiry and intellectual rigor is essential for their future. This requires an ongoing discussion about the role of academic institutions in shaping national and global discourse. The lessons learned from the past—particularly the dangers of subordinating universities to external political forces—must inform present efforts to safeguard academic freedom.

In conclusion, universities must remain committed to their foundational mission: fostering intellectual curiosity, advancing knowledge, and promoting ethical inquiry. The humanities should not be reduced to instruments of political ideology, nor should they be sidelined in favor of purely technical disciplines. Instead, a holistic academic environment—where tradition and innovation coexist—offers the best path forward. The ability of universities to navigate this balance will determine their relevance in the evolving landscape of higher education.

Conclusion

Universities were once centers of dialogue between theology, philosophy, and science—a space where questions of existence, morality, and knowledge converged. The University of Opole's complex history demonstrates both the fragility and necessity of academic institutions in times of ideological and technological upheaval.

As technology reshapes education, we must ask: Can universities reclaim their role as spaces for holistic intellectual exploration, integrating both scientific progress and humanistic reflection? Or will they become mere training grounds for corporate research, losing their capacity to question, reflect, and engage with the deeper meanings of existence? The answers to these questions will determine whether the modern university remains a beacon of knowledge and ethical inquiry—or whether it fades into irrelevance in the face of a world governed solely by technological determinism.

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