EVGENII BALATSKII

The Formation of a “Dissertation Trap”

In each consecutive round of reforms, Russia’s advancement toward a market transformation has given rise to distinctive economic and social anomalies. One such anomaly is the “dissertation trap,” which implies the purchase and sale of academic degrees and ranks in a corresponding “black” market. Such sales are already recognized as a fact of Russian life, one that some authors call the market in dissertation services.1 By now, many aspects of the emergence and operation of the “dissertation trap” have been studied in sufficient detail, but many more remain open. The present article analyzes the sociocultural characteristics of this exotic phenomenon.


Professor Evgenii Vsevolodovich Balatskii, Doctor of Economics, is vice-director for foreign contacts at the Institute of State and Municipal Administration in the State University of Administration.


Notes renumbered for this edition.—Ed.
The Magnitude of the Problem

At present, there are reliable data indicating that the purchase of academic degrees takes place not only in Russia but in the developed countries as well.\(^2\) As a result, some scholars have been able to maintain that the “dissertation trap” is not a purely Russian phenomenon but international in nature. In our view, however, this argument misses the point. The purchase of academic degrees and ranks does place in many, if not all, countries, but the issue is not the existence of such sales but their magnitude. Viewed from this perspective, the “Russian dissertation trap” is unique, because it has a genuinely mass nature, whereas such sales in the developed countries are rare exceptions to the rule. For example, there were and are universities in the United States that “specialize” in issuing flawed diplomas, but the number of such universities is small; the relative mass of unqualified Ph.D. holders in the United States is also insignificant. In Russia, the present author conservatively estimates that “fake” dissertations account for approximately 50 percent of all dissertations defended in the overwhelming majority of scholarly councils in the social sciences. We could even argue that many Russian dissertation councils would stagnate if we stripped them of purchased dissertations. The exception to the rule in Russia is quite different: a dissertation council that takes no part in the commercialization of dissertation services.

In this way, Russia in its period of economic reforms has generated a “dissertation trap” that in terms of its magnitude and cynicism is unique in the civilized world. The purchase of academic degrees and ranks has become so widespread that the official norm (a scholar who writes his or her own dissertation) is being gradually ousted by its opposite—a deviation from the norm (the purchase of a dissertation). The common people’s reaction attests to this state of affairs. For example, Russians no longer express either surprise or annoyance on hearing that someone has bought an academic degree. In fact, people now see such purchases as normal, everyday incidents, whereas West Europeans are openly startled by the information.\(^3\)

We can maintain without fear of error that the “dissertation
"dissertation trap" is also unique to Russia itself. Although some scholars are convinced that the current trend derives from the practices of the academic community of the former Soviet Union, here again we would argue that these scholars are missing the point. In the USSR only individual “bosses” with significant administrative resources (directors of large institutes, university presidents, party leaders, etc.) made use of this “black-market” tool, whereas almost anyone can take advantage of it in present-day Russia if he or she can afford the necessary fee, which is not large by today’s standards. At present, an ordinary young person who is formally enrolled in graduate school, works at a commercial firm, and earns a decent salary can afford to purchase an academic degree. Nothing of the sort took place in the former USSR. This again testifies to the greater reach of the phenomenon and to its transition into a mass artifact.

The Problem of Origins: The International Aspect

The emergence of a “dissertation trap” with a “Russian face” in itself requires serious thought. Why did this happen in Russia and not, for instance, in the United States, France, or Great Britain?

It makes perfect sense to assume that certain special social conditions in Russia contributed to the formation of a “black” market in dissertations, but even a superficial analysis disproves this thesis. The problem is that in Russia academic degrees and ranks never had and still do not have the same public recognition as in the West. For instance, in the United States and Europe the possession of a doctoral degree places an individual on a qualitatively different level of the social hierarchy. Addressing a person who holds a doctoral degree requires one to *articulate* this fact. In other words, a person who does not hold a doctoral degree is addressed in a traditional official form (as, say, Mr. Jones), whereas a person who holds a doctoral degree is addressed in an emphatically polite form (Dr. Jones). This mode of addressing academics is required, and a person who violates the rule is automatically written off as a marginal, uncultured individual. Ordinary members of the public express hostility toward such violators of informal verbal norms.4

A similar, even stronger norm of articulation is used in Western
countries with reference to faculty members: a person who holds the position or has the rank of a university professor is addressed either by his or her last name with a mandatory pronunciation of his faculty status (for instance, Professor Jones) or by the prefix alone (Professor).

These norms are not used in Russia. People who hold a candidate’s or doctoral degree and mention this fact on their business cards cannot expect any special deferential form of address from other members of society. Simply speaking, Ivan Ivanovich remains Ivan Ivanovich, whether he holds an academic degree or not. Members of the Russian social organism are, as a rule, indifferent to a person’s scholarly attributes. Moreover, in many cases, the existence of an academic degree is specially withheld and not verbalized. As a vivid example of this, we can mention the biographies of well-known scholars published here. Thus, Paul Ferris’s biography of Sigmund Freud is Dr. Freud in the original, whereas in Russian translation the doctoral degree disappears, and the book is called simply Sigmund Freud [Zigmund Freid]. Similarly, William Seabrook’s biography of Robert Wood, the “father of contemporary optical physics,” is Doctor Wood in the original, whereas in Russian translation the doctoral degree again disappears, and the book is published under the primitivized title Robert Wood [Robert Vud]. We could, of course, provide an infinite number of such examples.

At first glance, the examples presented above may seem to cover only translations into Russian, but if we study the issue more closely, it is not difficult to see that at issue here are deep cultural differences in people’s attitude toward scholars and scholarship. Incidentally, Seabrook’s Robert Wood lost its doctorate in the Soviet period (1985), whereas Ferris’s Sigmund Freud appeared in contemporary Russia (2001). Therefore, the general trend in perceptions of the academic doctorate continued despite the transformation of the Soviet Union into capitalist Russia.

Hence the Western views of academic degrees derive from a profound sense of their high social status and are reinforced by a consistent system of articulating the presence of such degrees, whereas the Russian model has no such roots.
Identifying differing models of socialization in Western and Russian views of academic degrees leads us to appreciate that Westerners are the ones who have the weightier social reasons for striving to obtain academic degrees. It would not be surprising if the “dissertation trap” were most prevalent in the United States. If we add to the equation that the world’s wealthiest people—the ones with the capacity to pay almost any amount of money to ensure permanent respect articulated toward themselves—live in the United States, the formation of an “American face” on the “dissertation trap” seems quite natural. That has not, however, happened. The “dissertation trap,” as a distinctive norm of a certain type, has become widespread in Russia but not in the United States. On the surface, we seem to have uncovered a paradox. Where does it come from?

The Problem of Origins: Historical Aspects

In our opinion, it would be quite reasonable to assume that the “dissertation trap” in Russia can be explained through a historical analysis of the origins of high-status academic degrees. Strange as it may seem, however, this line of analysis leads us to the realization that here, too, Russia had fewer opportunities to enter the “black” market in dissertations.

The issue is that the Russian advanced-degree system did not and so far does not coincide with the Western system, which is inseparably tied to the university system. Russia’s one-tier system of specialists with a higher education and two-tier system of academic degrees—candidate of sciences and doctor of sciences—does not coincide with the Western model, which is characterized by a two-tier system of specialists with a higher education—bachelor’s and master’s degrees—and a one-tier system of academic degrees, the doctorate of philosophy. What does that mean in terms of origins?

First, the history of the Western academic degree system is much richer than the history of the Russian system. This is because the Western system directly relies on the multicentury history of European universities and their extremely high status. The current
Russian degree system with its candidates and doctors of sciences is not even ninety years old—clearly not long enough for the public to absorb at the *genetic level* the idea that academic degrees have high value, as happened in Europe. For example, the cumulative history of academic degrees in Russia does not exceed 250 years: the first academic degrees were granted to Russian scholars only in 1765, and the legal foundations of these degrees were guaranteed by the Decree on the Formation of Schools ([Ob ustroistve uchilishch,] 1803). Some scholars have noted that the institutional defense of dissertations was never completely established in prerevolutionary Russia, and from 1917 to the mid-1930s the degree conferred no financial rewards.7

Second, the Western academic degree system has always been and remains *universal*, used throughout most of the civilized world—unlike the Russian system, which even in its best years was adopted only in socialist countries. The tradition of Western doctorates being recognized internationally is again connected with the role of European universities, which were initially aimed at disseminating the universal Catholic teaching (theology). Russia’s adoption of Orthodox Christianity left it outside the European university system as it went its own way. We need only recall that the state, in the person of the empress, founded Russia’s first university several centuries after the establishment of the first European universities.8

Third, the ancient traditions of European universities laid powerful foundations of *heightened respect and piety* for doctors of philosophy among the common people. We need only mention that a doctoral candidate at the Sorbonne could not earn his degree until he had endured, among other trials, an ordeal by debate: from 6 A.M. until 6 P.M. he was “attacked” by twelve doctors attending his defense, who replaced one another every thirty minutes while the candidate was not permitted to eat or drink for the entire twelve hours. Those who successfully survived the ordeal were declared doctors of theology.9 Under these circumstances, the general public perceived a man with a doctorate, without exaggeration, as a kind of superman, two or three heads above a common peasant or townsman. This system probably maximized demonstrations of the
academic degree. In this context, we can see as symptomatic the legend of Faust, who, after making a deal with Mephistopheles, signed the contract in his own blood, “Johann Faust, Doctor of Theology.”

In Russia academic degrees were never wrapped in such a halo of admiration and respect.

In addition to these points, we can note that the high status accorded university doctorates in the West also reflected the special status of the universities themselves, each of them a kind of “state within a state.” For example, even in contemporary France, the police are formally required to obtain permission from the university president before they enter a university building. Although the rule is often broken, its existence testifies to the strength of universities and university traditions, including those related to academic degrees.

Fourth, Western doctorates of philosophy have greater name stability than Russian certificates. Again, this derives from the university traditions of the Western system, in which a specific university awards each doctorate and the universities themselves are, we can say, eternal structures that rarely shut down and never change their names. To put it simply, a doctorate from Harvard, Oxford, or the Sorbonne speaks for itself. In Russia the situation is quite different. Thus, a candidate of sciences’ degree is awarded by the Higher Degree Commission with reference to the organization in which the dissertation was defended. At present, however, many “old” research institutes and universities have either disappeared or radically changed their names. At times, it is quite difficult to identify the place where a degree holder defended his or her dissertation. Doctoral diplomas in Russia are issued by a central bureaucratic structure, the Higher Degree Commission, which also changes its name and status from time to time. In addition, the Russian doctorate is nameless in the sense that it has no formal link with the organization where the dissertation defense took place (at least, the diploma does not list the institution). Even stranger is the Russian system of awarding associate and full professorships. Thus, one can attain the rank of professor in one’s field, and the rank is awarded by the Higher Degree Commission of the Ministry of Education and Science of
the Russian Federation with no mention of the organization that petitioned that the applicant receive the diploma (certificate). The departments where applicants work can also award professorships. In this case, the name of the department—but not its parent organization—appears on the diploma (certificate), in place of the academic field, which has a highly restricted list. As a result, a person acquires certification of rank in an amorphous department of an unknown university. The namelessness of Russian diplomas and the instability of the awarding institutions lower the value of Russian diplomas and academic ranks relative to their Western analogues.

Fifth, Russia is in transition at the moment. In 2008 the Bologna Declaration [on the European Space in Higher Education] comes into force, and Russian academic degrees will be altered to comply with Western standards. At present, it is not yet clear exactly how the conversion of current Russian academic degrees to Western degrees will take place, but we can be sure that it will happen, sooner or later. Even now, we can clearly tell that, however the conversion is implemented, it will devalue the position of either current candidates of sciences or current doctors of sciences (either a candidate’s degree or a current doctorate will be made equivalent to a Western Ph.D.). One would think that this fact alone would douse the desire of well-to-do citizens to pay big bucks (usually in hard [convertible] currency) to obtain a dubious “soft” (nonconvertible) diploma. It would seem that on the eve of a “shakeup” of the entire academic degree system, it would make sense to lie low and wait, but that is not happening: demand for all academic degrees remains high among wealthy businessmen and civil servants.

The historical quirks characterizing the academic degree systems in Russia and the West that we have described work unambiguously to the advantage of the West. In this sense, the Western model of academic degrees has greater potential for the emergence of a “black” market in dissertation services. But again, that argument contradicts empirical observations. Therefore, Russia must have some other factor not present in the West or, conversely, lack something found in the West. What is this factor?
The Paradox of Saturation

One factor, at first glance, could explain the rejection of the “dissertation trap” by Western countries. Statistical data have shown that the Russian market is by one or two orders of magnitude less saturated than that of developed Western countries with specialists holding academic degrees. Thus, in 2002 the proportion of graduate students to undergraduates in Russia was 0.3 percent. In the same period, the proportion of doctoral students to undergraduates in the United States was 2.1 percent, in Great Britain 9 percent, and in France 12 percent. It is not difficult to see that Russia has one-fortieth as many doctoral students per undergraduate as does France. Could this fact explain the heightened demand for academic degrees in Russia?

We cannot rule out the possibility that shortages play a role in the formation of the “dissertation trap.” In and of themselves, though, shortages could not support such distinctive and extensive trading in “black-market” dissertations. In addition, the relative shortage contradicts the higher prestige of doctorates in the West relative to Russia. If Western labor markets are saturated, even oversaturated, with specialists holding academic degrees, that could devalue the doctorate in those countries, but it does not. This is another paradox that does not fit into the overall picture of the phenomenon under study.

Specific Features of the Russian Dissertation Market

Before we try to explain the emergence of a “dissertation trap” in Russia, we will analyze certain essential characteristics of those obtaining academic degrees.

If we assume that buying a dissertation and an academic degree is an ordinary economic transaction, it makes sense that the potential buyer would have at least a rough idea of the product he wants and for which he is willing to pay. In real life, however, this simple hypothesis is far from always satisfied. Thus, our contacts with people seeking a candidate’s degree have revealed two surprising facts.

First, many graduate students whose status requires them to
work on a dissertation are willing to “hire” someone to write it for a ridiculously low price (for instance, US$500).\textsuperscript{15}

Second, many graduate students who have used the services of “professionals” sincerely believe that a candidate’s dissertation can be written in a short period of time (for instance, one month).\textsuperscript{16}

These two facts unambiguously indicate that present-day participants in the dissertation market have no understanding of what they are buying. They understand neither the amount of work involved in writing a dissertation, nor how time- and labor-consuming the process is, nor the dissertation requirements. Many apparently believe that a dissertation is like a regular course paper, only bigger. Given that today’s students toss together their papers from a bunch of Internet materials, many graduate students likewise assume that dissertations can be swiftly compiled from Internet resources. We would note here that the people demonstrating such ignorance of what a dissertation is are not ordinary citizens (farmers and workers), who are far removed from academe, but graduate students who are literally inside the research industry. We can confidently state that such incompe
tence about writing and defending a dissertation among those taking a direct part in these activities is unique to Russia. It is difficult to assume that any doctoral student in the West has no clue what a doctoral dissertation involves.

The “scholarly infantilism” of Russian degree candidates that we have analyzed cannot raise the prestige of the degrees. Experience, however, has shown that it need not destroy public prestige. This is another paradox that needs explanation in terms of the system as a whole.

Another factor can be considered purely Russian. At present, among broad population strata we can observe an almost complete lack of understanding of the existing research institutions. For instance, few people grasp the differences among an academic degree, an academic rank, and an academic position. Thus, not everyone can tell the difference between a candidate of sciences, a doctor of sciences, an assistant professor, a professor, a senior research fellow, a leading research fellow, a head research fellow, and the like. Most people find it confusing to separate a doctor from a professor, never mind understanding the hierarchy between
a doctor and an assistant professor, which is absolutely over their heads. A dangerous trend of the last decade is that even university students who deal with various levels of academics every day do not grasp these distinctions. Such an unfavorable informational and psychological “curtain” hanging over academics does not contribute to the formation of a strong desire to obtain an academic degree. As it turns out, however, it does not interfere with this desire either. We need to explain this paradox together with the others.

**Psychological Consequences of the “Black” Market in Dissertations**

One factor supporting the “dissertation trap” is the absence of psychological discomfort among agents of the “black” market. We need to analyze this aspect of the problem in more detail.

Our interviews with numerous respondents have enabled us to identify three effects that are essential for our topic.

The first effect is the buyer’s growing interest in the dissertation topic. In other words, someone who could be dismissed as a cynical pragmatist who paid someone else to write his dissertation begins slowly but surely to take an interest in “his” topic as he receives and reads “his” material. Often, by the time of the dissertation defense, the buyer has so attached himself to the dissertation written by someone else that he is ready to defend each of its arguments with absolute sincerity. We could say that in this preparatory stage, the degree candidate undergoes a psychological transformation that marks the first stage of adaptation to the research community that he is trying to enter. This effect is not total, of course, but it has been proven to affect many buyers of academic degrees.

We must mention here that the psychological pliability of Russian participants in the “black” dissertation market has deep roots, mainly people’s desire to leave behind their prosaic everyday activities for something interesting, lofty, and romantic. This is where science, with its diverse attributes, offers a last refuge, an escape from the routine and the everyday.

The second effect is that the buyer of a dissertation becomes convinced that he is a full-fledged (!) member of a scientific community
and has full rights to it. In other words, over time, the person is inclined to forget that his dissertation was written by someone else and that his attainment of an academic degree was a pre-rehearsed performance and a complete profanation. At present, there are numerous funny examples in which buyers of dissertations “assume their roles completely.” In fact, in this final stage of the transaction, we can see the final psychological metamorphosis of the buyer of an academic degree, in which he “merges” with the research community that he has entered. This effect is also not universal, of course, but successful academic mimicry by many buyers of academic degrees is more the rule than the exception.

The third effect takes place when the dissertation writer loses his positive attitude toward science and the scholarly research community. Here the specialist who “has sold himself” to write another’s dissertation experiences a peculiar psychological shock. Scholarly research is always greater than mere moneymaking; it is a creative process. Every scholarly result, no matter how small, comes about through intellect and hard work; it is a creative act. When someone takes part in manufacturing figures that look like those of successful scholars but in reality have nothing to do with academic research, that person inevitably loses respect for the scientific field that permits such a pretense. As one respondent put it, “once a person has written a dissertation for money, he irrevocably loses some of his respect for science, just as a man who once visits a prostitute irrevocably loses some of his respect for women.” This analogy is, of course, rather crude and circumstantial, perhaps overly direct and categorical, but it is, on the whole, precise and revealing. The main outcome of this third effect is the erosion of the psychological and moral foundations of scholarly research among members of the so-called research core.

The combination of the three psychological effects described above changes the portrait of our nation’s science rather dramatically. We could argue here that the “dissertation trap” generates its own moral psychological backdrop within the scholarly community.

An important question that permits an accurate assessment of the role the “dissertation trap” plays in academe involves the jobs held by people who have bought academic degrees. It is not so dangerous
if they continue to work in politics, business, and state service, but if they move into scholarly research, their presence becomes genuinely harmful. Our experience shows that many officials and moneymakers transfer to jobs in higher education at a certain stage in their careers. Moreover, their personal connections, status, and capital mean that they usually hold administrative positions—for instance, department chair. Some abandon business (politics); others combine their main activities with administrative work in academe. Some also teach university lecture courses. Because most buyers of academic degrees sincerely regard themselves as scholars, they experience no psychological discomfort in higher educational institutions. But the most important point here is different: the “return” of such people to academe does take place, and such cases are far from rare.

**Economic Reforms and Imitative Strategies**

Above we deliberately collected several social paradoxes affecting academe, which require explanation as we continue. With this end in view, we analyze the general model of economic reform.

The results of reforms depend on two groups of factors: initial conditions and reform policy. The initial conditions include four types of variables:\20

—sociocultural characteristics: levels of reciprocal trust, respect for the law and power, the strength and direction of motivation, educational level and understanding of the surrounding world, value configuration, and the like;

—the extent of economic imbalance (the deviation of observed economic parameters from their values in a state of effective equilibrium): the share of the private sector and of unregulated prices, the level of income differentiation, the level of labor exploitation, and the like;

—the quality of institutions: the effectiveness of law enforcement, crime levels, the stability of the law, the effectiveness of government bodies, and the like; and

—the availability of resources: the possession of natural resources, climate characteristics, the level of people’s welfare, and the like.
All these initial conditions depend on the type of economic reform and the means of implementing it. The sociocultural factor has a special interest for us. Although the ongoing reform and transformation of our economic system have already been described in detail, we should add a few important elements to that description.21

Any massive reform, as a rule, affects people’s value system. In fact, any reform marks a transition from one value system to another. Different reforms only affect the width of the gap between the old value system and the new. In real life, however, the transition causes a problem in that it takes a certain period of time, during which old values dissipate at the same time as new ones are formed. This process is not synchronized, so the old values may be destroyed before new ones can be developed. In such cases, a temporary value vacuum emerges, accompanied by public disorientation regarding appropriate goals. How successful a population is in overcoming a value vacuum depends in many ways on its initial sociocultural characteristics.

The value vacuum itself, especially if it lasts for a long time, provokes unusual public reactions. One is the intensification of imitative strategies, in which most economic subjects completely fail to understand the current situation but begin to imitate successful members of society and to copy their behavior in the hope of similar success. In fact, an imitative strategy is behavior based on someone else’s value system, which the adoptee usually does not understand. Normally, people adopt optimization strategies that rely on their own (internal) value system.

Initial sociocultural parameters have great influence on the adoption of imitative strategies. Where the public operates at a high cultural level, the initial value system soon reverts to the right direction, while poorly understood and ill-considered imitative strategies rarely acquire mass appeal. In populations with a relatively low cultural level, however, strategies of primitive imitation become the norm. If the imitation is based on certain false or badly distorted values, moreover, the imitative strategies can subsequently have an extremely negative impact on socioeconomic dynamics. Properly conducted reforms can offset a low cultural level among the population, whereas mistakes in the course of reforms can exacerbate this factor.
Now that we have built this simple theoretical model, let us see how it “comes alive” when applied to the “dissertation trap.”

**Real and False Values**

We have shown above that there are more social precursors in the Western world for the formation of a “black” market in “dissertation services” than in Russia. So what accounts for the prevalence of such a market here, and nowhere else?

The starting point of our explanation is the assumption that when economic reform began in Russia, the overall culture of the population was quite low. Specifically, the public did not understand what constituted and distinguished scholarship. Academic degrees and ranks were associated with success in life, which probably constituted the entire public knowledge of scholarly regalia. The reforms destroyed the old values before new ones could develop. Among the new values that did emerge, one was unquestionable—success. The ongoing reforms then created an entire class of people who, having done well economically, at a certain point wanted public recognition of their success. The obvious absence of new, distinct values itself fueled the desire for additional attributes of success. Members of the “new class” wanted something different. These people’s low cultural level precluded them from forming new internal interests and values, so they began to search for new external values. By accident, academic degrees attracted them as a certain universally recognized symbol of their holders’ high intellectual level and respectability. Although close ties had once existed between the possession of an academic degree and financial well-being, in the new society an academic degree was quite useless. The adoption of traditions also played a role, of course, but cultural momentum in and of itself could hardly have turned the “dissertation trap” into a stable “black-market” institution. Most probably, pragmatic members of the “new class” were attracted to pretty diplomas, because in their eyes the diplomas had a certain significance. As soon as they recognized the new value, they switched to an imitative strategy: to acquire an academic degree, as all smart people do.
This is precisely how the “dissertation trap” developed as a social phenomenon.\footnote{22}

Now I would like to comment on the sketch I have just made. First, I am not saying that the cultural level in Russia was lower than, for instance, in the United States or Western Europe. Those countries did not undertake far-reaching reforms that could have “tested” their cultural level. The absence of reforms in the West explains the paradox mentioned above, in which sales of academic degrees have not become established practice even though the social status of the doctorate is higher there than in Russia. We also cannot say that the cultural level in Russia was lower than in Eastern Europe or, for instance, China, where the “dissertation trap” did not emerge as a socially meaningful phenomenon, although those countries were affected by economic reforms. Reforms were probably conducted in a more prudent manner in these countries, so they did not intensify the existing absence of culture among the population. Another point is important here: the low level of culture characterizing members of the “new class” prevented Russia from passing the reform challenge and led to the formation of an abnormal social phenomenon, the “dissertation trap.” In other words, a low level of culture has an effect only under specific circumstances.

Now we examine another issue: how unique is the strategy of imitating “smart people” by purchasing an academic degree? As it turns out, recent Russian history has seen even more extravagant examples of imitative strategies. One of the most vivid examples is the purchase of expensive executive-class Mercedes by people who used to share one-room apartments with their entire families. Such people’s reasoning is simple: a Mercedes is a symbol of success (a new value!), so they must have it no matter what.

In one way or another, a person’s primitive nature gives rise to the use of such imitative strategies. In the same way that a Papuan wants shiny beads and is willing to give up all his possessions to obtain them, the well-to-do Russian of today sees an academic degree as a valuable toy he or she is dying to have. And just as the Papuan does not understand the real value of either cheap glass beads or precious emerald necklaces, the Russian nouveaux riches do not grasp the real value of an academic degree. What we see
here, in fact, is the replacement of real values by ones that are fake (symbolic), if not false. The examples we gave earlier revealing the buyers’ failure to comprehend the meaning and the “body” of a dissertation confirm the conclusion that the “dissertation trap” primarily reflects the economic agents’ low level of scholarly and universal human culture. This is not really surprising, as the reforms have made many people wealthy who hail from low social strata with low educational and cultural levels.23

The mechanism forming the “black” dissertation market analyzed above can be presented in a truncated form that emphasizes the role of the cultural factor as a meaningful initial condition of the reforms. Thus, the limited cultural potential among the population in the pre-reform period caused the emergence in the reform period of various ineffective institutions or, as they are called, institutional traps, including the “dissertation trap.” Even after reforms are completed, such ineffective institutions continue to destroy the cultural potential of the population, which exacerbates a grave situation and hinders the socioeconomic development of the country. This is precisely what we see in the cases described earlier, in which the purchase of academic degrees fills the academic community, on the one hand, with individuals who are by definition not fit scholars and, on the other, with fully trained researchers who have lost faith in science. This type of erosion among researchers leads to a decline in scholarly culture and deprives the country of its future. Thus, if reforms begin before a population’s cultural level has reached a certain critical value that blocks the potential emergence of ineffective institutions, that situation subsequently gives rise to the massive destruction of a country’s cultural potential. Or, to put it even more succinctly, limited culture at the beginning of reform, under unfavorable circumstances, suppresses what remains of that culture in subsequent rounds of development. This is the institution-forming role of the sociocultural factor.

The Value of Academic Degrees: Subjective Concepts

Our remaining task is to clear up the point that the moneymakers who buy academic degrees do not understand. What is the real value of an academic degree, as distinct from the symbol?
We cannot give an unequivocal answer to the question, so here we present our subjective response, which does not claim to be the ultimate truth.

Even though, at present, an academic degree confers little or no financial gain, it remains and probably always will remain highly valuable. Why?

_Thesis 1:_ Academic degree holders are engaged in scholarly research. The public recognizes this connection. If scholarly research has value, then so does an academic degree; and if scholarly research has no value, then neither does an academic degree. A written, defended dissertation that leads to an academic degree testifies to an individual’s having already experienced the main stages of scholarly creativity.

_Thesis 2:_ Engagement in scholarly research is a great privilege. We should clarify this thesis. Scholarly research is a privileged type of activity because of its fundamental essence. So what is scholarly research? In our view, _scholarly research is a search for a beautiful truth_. This is the present author’s deeply subjective view. All three constituent parts are important here. Thus, a search contains elements of creativity, romance, and adventure, which always accompany a quest. Obviously, these qualities are unquestionable advantages viewed against the backdrop of the routine, dreary, and monotonous work that most people do. The second component of scholarly research—truth—contains something elevated, universal, and everlasting. An opportunity to encounter such attributes of human existence is also an unquestionable advantage compared to the low, transient needs of the people one finds in most occupations. The third component—beauty—is directly connected with a person’s esthetic perception of the world, and its inclusion in one’s professional activity is in and of itself already a supreme advantage, especially if one takes into account the vast number of people who must constantly deal with the horrors and depravities of human existence. Hence an individual who is engaged in a search for universal expressions of life and, in addition, renders these expressions in their most elegant and graceful form in accordance with his esthetic concepts undoubtedly belongs to a privileged class.

The combination of Thesis 1 and Thesis 2 helps us comprehend
that an academic degree holder is engaged in the search for a beautiful truth. Objectively, that situation must arouse respect, maybe even envy. This aspect of scholarly creativity lies beneath the high social status given to an academic degree and marks the true value of academic attributes.

If we accept the view presented above, then what happens when one buys an academic degree?

The desire to buy an academic degree as a certain symbol of intelligence and success—being based on a total misunderstanding of the essence of scholarly research, scholarly creativity, and the process of writing a dissertation—means that this desire is based on false values of the benefit being acquired, not its true values. If someone holds an academic degree without ever encountering research, then the degree has no real value. Even if someone writes his or her own dissertation and earns an academic degree, then leaves academe, the value of the degree is dubious, since he or she left everything good about it behind, which cannot command greater respect from those around the person. Cultivating a life strategy based on false values attests to an immature mind and a serious inferiority complex, caused by unrealized creative potential. Hence the presence in Russia of a large number of well-to-do people who resort to this strategy for obtaining an academic degree indicates the limited cultural “baggage” of the country’s population. This conclusion is extremely important, as it contradicts the traditional view of the problem: that the increase in the number of academic degree holders (including purchased degrees) testifies to the country’s rising educational and cultural potential. Here we can observe the distortion of the meaning of formal indicators by “black-market” operations.

In the context of the points stated above, the meaning of the “dissertation trap” also becomes clearer. It makes no sense to allege that in a certain country people are better or worse. This especially applies to commerce and business, which are by definition directed at maximizing profits. Undoubtedly, in all countries business and commerce people cheat and never miss an opportunity to violate moral, ethical, and even certain legal norms to increase their economic effectiveness. One cannot cheat in scholarly research,
however, since scholarly research, by definition, is a search for truth. If crooks infiltrate academe, they distort the very meaning of scholarly research. The Western community has set up mechanisms to keep crooks out of science, whereas Russia has established mechanisms that promote their flow into academe.

One more important aspect follows from the points above. Our discussion raises the following question: how should we treat obviously weak dissertations that candidates wrote themselves? Is this another form of the “dissertation trap,” which we should fight as fiercely as we fight the trade in dissertations?

The answer is that purchased dissertations are not the same thing as weak dissertations written unassisted by their authors. We all have our own gifts, capacity for work, and luck. A more fortunate individual obtains better results, the one with a greater capacity for work can give the results greater scope, and a more talented individual can create a more perfect form. Each of these people is engaged in scholarly research sincerely and honestly, to the best of his or her ability and talent. The person who buys a dissertation is not engaged in research at all and enters academe through primitive deception. Hence these two phenomena belong to different classes. Whereas we can find a way to put up with weak but independently written dissertations, we cannot tolerate purchased dissertations written by outside contractors.

Methods of Combating Abuses

The essence of the “dissertation trap” is inefficiency and stability. It will probably not disappear on its own. So how can we fight it?

At present, the state, through its various agencies, is trying to resort to repressive methods. Our experience has shown, however, that almost all of them are ineffective. Even in cases where the dishonest acquisition of an academic degree can be proven, the degree can no longer be revoked. We cannot break into the dishonest individual’s apartment, twist his arm, and confiscate his fake diploma. It also makes no sense to demand that the Higher Degree Commission (HDC) publish lists of invalid diplomas in its bulletin. First, hardly anyone reads the HDC Bulletin, so no one will see the
retraction. Second, even if someone does see it, a few years later, they will have forgotten about it, and the crook can go on using his diploma for personal gain without worry.

It is also rather difficult to monitor dissertation defenses at a preliminary stage. After all, we cannot turn the Higher Degree Commission into an analogue of the Federal Security Service or an add-on to the Prosecutor General’s Office. At present, the HDC is still an expert community rather than a repressive body. We can also question the HDC’s expertise in two respects. First, how qualified and responsible are the members of the HDC? Unfortunately, most of the country’s best scholars, the really highly qualified and talented, do not sit on the HDC. As a rule, the HDC is staffed with individuals who have achieved a certain administrative success, which nowadays has little to do with scholarly achievements. Second, does not the HDC already have too much expert authority? If the HDC kills a dissertation, it pits itself against the advisor who supervised the work, the opponents at the defense, the leading institution that oversaw the expert examination of the dissertation, and the expert council that supervised the defense. In such a dispute, who can claim the better right to having made the correct decision?

In our view, two scenarios for improving the situation are possible here: a radical scenario and a moderate one. The radical version has already been discussed in the literature and is for many reasons considered undesirable. Here we discuss moderate reform of the current system, which, in our opinion, must include the following provisions.

(1) We must abolish the conveyer-belt system of defending dissertations. Graduate schools (including at the doctoral level) must become a type of postgraduate education, but they must not have plans to graduate a set number of candidates (doctors) of sciences. There must, of course, be no sanctions for failing to fulfill such plans or incentives for surpassing them. There must be only one criterion: if a dissertation meets current requirements, it is recommended for defense; and if it does not, it is not. In this case, the guiding principle must be “quality rather than quantity” (less is more). Quantity must not suppress quality, and the system must not create any incentives promoting such distortions.
(2) All diplomas must indicate as many relevant names as possible. The Higher Degree Commission can continue to award diplomas to candidates (doctors) of sciences and certificates to associate professors (or professors), but the documents should include several additional pieces of information. For academic degrees, the diploma would name:

— the institution where the defense of the dissertation took place;
— the field of study in which the dissertation was prepared;
— the title of the dissertation;
— the chairman of the dissertation council that awarded the academic degree;
— the applicant’s academic advisor;
— the opponents at the dissertation defense;
— the principal organization that was associated with the dissertation; and
— the expert from the principal organization who wrote a review of the dissertation.

For academic ranks, the certificate should identify:

— the organization that initiated the application;
— the chairman of the scholarly council that initiated the application;
— the department in which the applicant was teaching and the academic disciplines he has taught; and
— the individuals who have defended dissertations under the supervision of the applicant and the titles of their dissertations.

The introduction of these names will increase personal responsibility for each defense and establish an information bank on the subjects of the academic research market, which in its turn will establish their professional reputation. Today all participants in a dissertation defense remain anonymous. Meanwhile, throughout the world all the names listed above serve as a kind of pass into the world of scholarly research. State participation in the form of watermarks on the paper of an issued diploma is absolutely insufficient to confirm its quality.

The proposed measure to personalize responsibility for each dissertation also contains another important aspect as well. The
names listed in the diploma will have meaning only for experts in that area. Those experts will assess the academic degree holders according to their merits. People who have nothing to do with a given field of knowledge will gain no information from the names in the diploma, which will then have no value to them. In this way, “diplomas with all the names” also create a targeted audience for their holders, which is important if we are to protect the scholarly (rather than the symbolic!) status of academic degrees.

(3) We must intensify our propaganda on scholarly research. The public’s poor understanding at present of the content and meaning of scholarly research derives from the distinctive features of the current information space in Russia. Most common people do not receive enough information about scholarly research and those who engage in it. For the sake of comparison, we can cite the example of the United States, where in recent decades, the main characters in most novels and movies have been university professors, their work and scholarly achievements. In the last decade in Russia, the main characters of books and movies have been bandits and law-enforcement officers. This situation must be reconsidered and changed. People must understand that an academic degree indicates high-level achievements within a definite profession, not an abstract symbol. Otherwise, the situation will be best characterized by the well-known joke in which a professor, hearing what it will cost to repair his shoes, exclaims, “But that is half my monthly salary!” He is told: “Well, what’s so surprising about that, Professor? After all, you have no occupation.” When the public culture exists at such a low level, the “dissertation trap” is guaranteed to continue for a long time.

The patterns leading to the formation of the “dissertation trap” that we analyzed in this article extend far beyond the topic of discussion. A study of this topic enables us to understand the mechanism characterizing the development of similar processes that account for many social anomalies in the period of economic reform. Methodological instruments emphasizing the sociocultural factor will also make possible the successful dissection of other phenomena of contemporary Russian society.
Notes


2. See Kalimulin, “Rossiiskii rynok dissertatsionnykh uslug.”

3. Here is a typical example: a citizen of the Netherlands, when told about the Russian practice of buying dissertations and academic degrees, responded by repeating, over and over, “Strange!”

4. To clarify, the issue here involves official contacts, rather than informal ties among neighbors and old friends.


7. See Kalimulin, “Rossiiskii rynok dissertatsionnykh uslug.”

8. Similar events sometimes occurred in the West. For example, Queen Elizabeth I of England issued the decree establishing the oldest Irish university, Trinity College, but it was the corporation of Dublin that granted the lands of the Monastery of All Saints to the new university. In any case, state initiatives regarding universities are the exception, not the rule, in the West (see O. Gusakova, “Za dragotsennymi znaniiami—na izumrudnyi ostrov,” *Platnoe obrazovanie*, 2006, no. 3 [41], p. 55).


12. For example, the present author’s candidate’s degree came from the Economic Scientific Research Institute, now called the Institute for Macroeconomic Research. To laymen these appear to be different organizations, giving them legitimate grounds to question the status of this degree. Moreover, the diploma was issued by the USSR Council of Ministers’ Higher Degree Commission, which also no longer exists.

13. Thus, the present author’s doctorate was issued by Higher Degree Commission, which was an independent structure. These days it has become the Higher Degree Commission of the Ministry of Science and Education of the Russian Federation, which casts doubt on the status of the degree. The author’s
professorial certificate was issued by the Higher Degree Commission of the Ministry of Education of the Russian Federation, now the Ministry of Science and Education of the Russian Federation, which also muddles the real status of the certificate.


15. At one point, the author received three such offers for a price within this range.

16. The present author has personally encountered such respondents.

17. One woman in the group told us with amazement how her husband had gradually switched from complete contempt and disrespect for his purchased dissertation to a recognition of how useful and important the research question really was.

18. Kalimulin cites an example in which someone who bought a dissertation began to reminisce about his work on the dissertation while in conversation with the person who had written it for him. Being so completely out of touch with reality is not unusual in the “black” market of dissertations (see Kalimulin, “Rossiiskii rynok dissertatsionnykh uslug”).

19. In literature, such specialists are called “writers” [given in English—Ed.]—that is, creators (see, for example, ibid.).

20. This classification of factors is based (although not entirely) on that found in V.M. Polterovich, “Politicheskaia kul’tura i transformatsionnyi spad (kommentarii k stat’e A. Khillmana ‘V puti k Zemle obetovannoi . . .’).” See Ekonomika i matematicheskie metody, 2002, no. 4, p. 97.


22. Some scholars have emphasized that in Western society the degree of a doctor of philosophy is rare not only among bureaucrats but also among specialists. The degree is a sign of membership in a special world—the academic community, which commands a certain respect among the broad popular masses but does not belong to the elite of business people, politicians, doctors of medicine, and lawyers (see Zhelezov, “Rossiiskii Ph.D.”, p. 16.)

23. As V.M. Polterovich has correctly pointed out, an independent and important sociocultural difference between the Russian and Western systems is that the Russian nouveaux riches are trying, by buying an academic degree, to convert wealth into respect—which in Russia, in contrast to the West, does not happen automatically. Here we are dealing with the effect of cultural inertia, in which the contemporary perception of wealth is affected by old socialist norms that do not recognize wealth as an independent value.