

Fundamentality or fundamentalism? About some aspects of higher education in Russia and terminology

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Abstract. The article is devoted to the problem of fundamentalism and the crisis of the education system in Russia. The authors demonstrate the subjective perception of the crisis of education either as a public institution in general or as a specific education system in specific historical circumstances. The study aims to establish or refute the existence of fundamentalist tendencies in the contemporary Russian educational discourse, as well as to identify the validity of using the term “fundamentalism” with regard to the philosophy of education and pedagogy. The research methods included case studies, comparative textual analysis, as well as historical-cultural and comparative methods. The authors note that the term “fundamentalism” was coined in science at the end of the 19th century. It had a completely different meaning, namely, a literal interpretation of a religious text within the framework of a particular tradition. The authors analyze a set of specific situations associated at first glance with the erroneous use of the term “fundamentalism” in Russian scientific articles to mean a generalization of the fundamental and academic nature of education, as well as substantiate the attitude according to which the application of this characteristic is not erroneous at all, but is a manifestation of some features of a specific form of fundamentalism, namely, academic fundamentalism.

Keywords: education, fundamentalism, academic fundamentalism, scientific fundamentalism.

1 Introduction

At the moment, it is difficult to find in Russian pedagogy and philosophy of education a review article or monograph that somehow does not proceed from the crisis of education, considering it either as a public institution in general or as a particular system in specific historical circumstances. Examples of works devoted to the crisis of the education system will be analyzed below.

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2 Fundamentalism as a sign of a crisis in the education system

“The world spiritual crisis in the education system, which has begun as early as in the 60s-70s of the 20th century, at the end of the century affected Russian society as well” [1: 60]. What are the contradictions on which this crisis is based, and what is its essence? According to the above-mentioned author, this is a contradiction of the traditional Russian education system, which was based on the principles of Enlightenment, and aimed at “preserving and reproducing spiritual experience, and socializing the individual” [1: 60]. In the context of the contemporary globalized information society, it has become “less effective”.

The author further concludes that the end of the 20th – the beginning of the 21st century is characterized by a certain “revolution” in education and that it was “caused by the crisis of the classical and post-classical education systems and their traditional principles – fundamentalism and academism” [1: 60]. Here the term “fundamentalism” is used in a completely nonstandard sense. The author himself comments on it as follows: “Fundamentalism (from Lat. *Fundamentum* meaning foundation) as a philosophical and methodological principle in science and education assumes that there is a certain basic core of knowledge, whose use makes it possible to solve many problems guaranteed” [1: 62]. The author does not cite the source of such an exotic interpretation of the term but, by the look of the context of the article, he further adheres to it.

Here are some more examples. In an article devoted to a similar problem, the authors, noting approximately the same problem as the author of the previous example, state: “Fundamentalism with a professional orientation of training is the key to building a unified system of higher ... education” [2: 71]. Fundamentalism and professionalism as different directions in education are opposed by the authors. That is, according to the authors, there are two directions in education: fundamental and professional, and currently, the evolution of education leads to the displacement of the first and the dominance of the second.

In science, the term “fundamentalism” was coined at the end of the 19th century and had a completely different meaning, namely, a literal interpretation of a religious text within the framework of a particular tradition [3: 84]. Soon after emerging in the USA at the end of the 19th century, the fundamentalists began to show themselves as an active social force, engaging in struggles in areas that were not directly part of religious discussions. For example, in 1925, the fundamentalists were even able to get a ban on teaching the theory of evolution in some states.

This perception, although being subjective, is still quite official. Thus, the report of the UN Working Group on discrimination against women contains an unequivocal statement: “A serious setback in the protection of women’s rights is observed in all regions of the world. This is happening in the context of the growth of fundamentalism...” [4]. That is, for the UN, fundamentalism is a threat to development.

Will one find in the English-language literature an interpretation of the term “fundamentalism” at least similar to some extent to the examples given at the beginning of the article? The authors could not find any such example. On the contrary, in scientific articles, this term is used strictly in its original religious and hermeneutical sense.

“Religious fundamentalism has played a significant role in the contemporary conservative attack on public education.” [5] Here the author invokes those interested even in the “limited degree of liberal or progressive education that currently exists,... to understand the nature and consequences of this ... reactionary social phenomenon.” However, this study was focused on the Seventh-day Adventist Church rather than on fundamentalists in general.

To remove doubts about the negative perception of fundamentalism as a more or less obscurantist trend even in the academic environment, one can address the abstract on the topic of fundamentalism, posted by one of the collaborations of the University of Montreal which notes that “Modern Western understanding of fundamentalism is often associated with

negative assumptions about returning to the foundations of a particular belief system” [6]. That is, the researchers proceed from the existing negative perception of fundamentalists as an obscurantist religious group.

The authors of the present study conclude that the unusual understanding of fundamentalism, revealed from the examples at the beginning of the article, is not found outside of the domestic educational discourse.

On the contrary, in the examples given at the beginning of the article, fundamentalism is perceived rather as solid support, which is the basis for preventing the collapse of the classical system of higher education focused on the ideals of Enlightenment. Perhaps, in the presented cases, one is dealing with an ordinary mistake of incorrect use of a scientific term. In the authors' opinion, this is not quite true, and the very fact that there are many examples of indexed scientific articles that interpret the word “fundamentalism” so uniformly, indicates the existence of a phenomenon that requires to be analyzed.

There is something in common in the attitude of the authors who give an understanding of fundamentalism as a commitment to fundamentality. Analyzing the value bases and goal-setting of the contemporary higher education system, the authors state “the existence of a problem consisting in replacing the priority of cultural value with the priority of knowledge” [7: 56]. Sometimes one can find a slightly different formulation in which values or cultural codes are replaced with skills, abilities or competencies, hard and soft skills. Philosophers see in the situation an even more significant, more acute fundamental problem: “The education ideology and philosophy in present-day conditions have been strongly influenced by three factors, namely, antipedagogy, postmodernism, and globalism” [8: 138]. Thus, there is a pronounced attitude to the rejection of a new round of modernization associated with the informatization of society and cybernetization, which devalues the very values on which some significant aspects of the traditional education system rest.

It should be noted that domestic experts on the history of religion from time to time “shift” the interpretation of fundamentalism. For example, the historian D.A. Golovushkin, in his review article on fundamentalism, has distinguished between fundamentalism and “pseudo-fundamentalism”, describing the latter negatively: “The doctrines, movements, and practices that turn religion and the religious into an instrument of socio-political struggle and socio-political technologies are completely different, pseudo-fundamentalist in nature” [9]. Based on the above, one can conclude that in both the attitudes of Russian historians and the attitudes of scientists engaged in pedagogy, a completely different opposition in the perception of fundamentalism is manifested itself. This is not the “progress – return to the roots” but rather “external form – internal meaning”. It is exactly the second concept that separates “fundamentalism” from “pseudo-fundamentalism”.

Fundamentalism is one of the potential responses to the modernization challenges facing society. Faced with the inevitable need for change, with new problems that urgently need to be solved, the fundamentalist chooses the option of returning to the roots, to the situation where such a problem simply did not exist [10: 69].

A similar response occurs to the challenges of the contemporary information society, in which the hurricane of information flows makes the accumulation of knowledge no longer a significant task, while the transformation of a high-consumption society made some of the fundamental values of the Enlightenment less significant. The higher education system faces strong competition from alternatives, such as courses and various distance learning practices [11]. Many authors of scientific publications on pedagogy and philosophy of education, recognizing the problem, on the contrary, develop certain models of innovative development of education [12], which would allow higher education to transform and meet the needs of a new society through decentralization and even faster training of professional personnel [13] (probably exactly due to the elimination of “fundamentality”), talk about the foundations of

continuing education [14], or ask about the connection between education and the crisis of personal identity[15].

3 Conclusion

The authors of the studies presented at the beginning of the present article consciously or unconsciously share a very common attitude in the academic environment to discredit new processes as a profanation of education (a favorite antithesis of fundamentalists – “sacred-profane”), while the response to this process should be a return to the classical system of fundamental education, which has undergone erosion in the light of the institutional effects of the social transformation. This attitude can be described to some extent as a kind of academic fundamentalism, although it manifests itself in a field, seemingly uncharacteristic of fundamentalism.

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