

A Lawless, Unjust Dismissal from a Ph.D. Program in the Year 2002

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Abstract: This article is the true story of a lawless dismissal of a Ph.D. student from a university and is mainly concerned with academic ethics and integrity, in that respect. Names of the victim, related persons, educative institutions involved and the cities are deliberately concealed or “masked”.

Key words: university, Ph.D. program, advisor, advisee, graduate student, dissertation/thesis, degree

1. Introduction: First We Get Roughly Acquainted with “P.P.”

One of the characters of the Play titled “*The Cherry Orchard*” by *Anton Chekhov*, a prominent author of Tsarist Russia; is a university student at a rather advanced age, with fairly thick eyeglasses. He is named *Peter Trofimov*. Another character of the mentioned play is a newly-rich merchant, whose main pleasure consists of appropriating the estates of poverty-stricken nobility. His education is very little. But he represents the future-promising new bourgeois class, who is gaining terrain at the cost of the declining aristocracy. At a certain scene he says the following overstatement regarding *Trofimov*: “He will soon reach the age of fifty and he is still a student!”

Now, our hero *P.P. (Perpetual Student)*, a person in flesh and blood, is not really much different from that fictitious counterpart pictured by *Chekhov*, in this respect. He commenced his graduate studies when he was already a senior functionary at the civil service. And this educative experience was to go on for many a years to come. How lucky are those who start their graduate studies at a fairly young age without the burden of practicing a profession simultaneously; even if it means getting along with a meager loan or scholarship!



The Laughing Voice — “He is not even aware of what is about to happen to him!”

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P.P.: the hero of our true story; (and in a little while, we will get to know the villain, as well) was a Ph.D. student in the city of α , at universities X and Y , following the same social science field of study, in a parallel manner. Shall we call him *overambitious* for having done what he did? Let us not say that. Instead; we may perhaps call him “prudential”. The two different programs were merely meant to be reserves or backups (*Ersatz*) for each other for probable “rainy days”, as a common metaphoric phrase would put it. None of the two attempts represented a guarantee to reach the end, the enthusiastically-craved diploma. Moreover; in Islamic creed and culture; it has been expressed that there is a limit to *everything* except science. Indeed; all things should have an optimum, mediocre level; knowledge being excepted. When it comes to acquire learning, one should merely keep going as far as he ever can.

P.P. had won the entrance exams while he had been placed into a provincial city as a government functionary. By chance, they later moved him to the big city α , where he grabbed the opportunity to follow his program at the X university very closely. His superiors granted him two half-days off per week. Sometime after his arrival in the new city, an amnesty regarding formerly dismissed students got declared by the government.

During his stay in the provinces, X -university had frozen his registration, whereas the Y -university had refused to do so (“Graduate studies represented a kind of luxury, not a necessity” according to the unwritten motto of that particular educative establishment, a hard institution where many students below certain average grades were regularly dropped). Now, he re-activated his program at the Y -university, as well. Meanwhile his efforts at the X -university had far advanced, by now. As a matter of fact; he was to receive his degree in a couple of years, without much of a problem.

2. Stalling off the Progress of the Dissertation

P.P. cleared off his courses and passed the proficiency exam at the Y -university. (His degree from the X -university was already in his pocket by this time). Right at this moment, as an irony of his government job, he got moved on to the big city β . Now that he was writing the dissertation itself, this geographical change could not be so detrimental. After all; there were no more courses to attend to. Indeed; he sent the first draft of the dissertation to his advisor by postal service.

It took the advisor seven long months to make corrections in red ink and send it back to his advisee. The advisee’s conventional thanking words were marked with a comment: “Well, well, well! We had just commenced!” This was the advisor’s first inconsistency. He had constantly urged his advisee to hurry, until he obtained this very first draft. The student felt some uneasiness but he dismissed anxious thoughts of all kinds. (Meanwhile the advisor’s keen tough-like expressions like “from where did you infer this comment, *boy?*” were spread out in abundance all over the thesis, too).

Six months after the starting of the corrections, the advisor made a phone call to his advisee’s work place, telling him to temporize and not to finish the work before one and a half year elapses. The specified interval was thoroughly unnecessary. The advisee pressed for a nearer deadline frantically. The advisor was adamant; he hung up the receiver.

The second version of the dissertation went to the advisor in due time but no more specific corrections were done. The advisor a letter qualifying the work of his student as good enough. Nevertheless; the typed letter went on to suggest some extra additions to make it *even better*. He emphasized the parallel opinions of a colleague, whose name was kept anonymous. This wholesome interpretation and evaluation began to form an entirely

different impression in the mind of the advisee.

3. Abusing the Trust

An impression of some kind is very meaningful and should by no means be underestimated. As a scholar of penal law said it on a TV screen causerie (January 18, 2004); in the field of justice, impressions occupy a weighted significance universally. When a witness is providing his testimony; the color flushing to his face, the harmony of his voice, his stammering attitude or his fluency and similar observations constitute important grounds leading to certain affirmations in the opinion of the unique judge, the board of judges and — if present, as in the American applications — the involved juries.

{Right at this moment, a breeze of association, makes me recall the words of a mystical *Anatolian* hymn attributed to *Gül (Rose) Emre*, a *rhapsode* of former times. It was released as a CV as accompanied by the *saz* instrument and sung by the magnificent voice of *Ruhi Su*¹ whose honorable proximity as a folk-songs-chorus-trainer at Bosphorus University had been directly experienced by me, one of the lucky chorus members, at the time. The wording goes as follows: “*First he [the new recruit to the convent] came and vowed loyalty [to his sheikh]/he lingered a moment at the falsehood [lied wording!]*” (“*Önce geldi ikrar verdi/Yalan sözde biraz durdu!*”).

So; the acquired-impressions do carry a lot of importance, as we had specified. The formed and matured impressions from the mouth of the advisor was giving a rather conspicuous message as follows: “Do not require any hurry on my part! Do not keep bothering me, either. Don’t you see that it was you who had caused those make-believe alterations merely by your tendency to speed up? So, you deserve to cope with those so-called changes! It is hard to explain but time is needed for me. Can’t you understand this fact from my insinuations? I can even obtain extra time for you from the university administration, if necessary. Leave all that to me! Is it not I who keeps renewing your registration, now that you are far away?”

P.P. was exempt from the recently-instigated student fee² as a former student returning in accordance with the amnesty. Thanks to this advantage, his renewal of registration at the beginning of each semester was a simple task, a click at the computer environment. His advisor was doing this as he promised. In this manner, he was continuing to receive the related mediocre advising-wages from the university accounting office, naturally. On the part of the advisee; the “*atonement*” required in return for the continuing favor was being grateful to the advisor and displaying limitless obedience to him despite the overpowering and domineering attitude of the former.

P.P. can not ever forget the following incident. On one occasion just after his appointment to the city β he returned to the city α to arrange for the transport of his house commodities. He took the occasion for a visit to his advisor’s office at the university. Just at the moment two tall girls from his undergraduate class intruded into the room somewhat aggressively. Both marched towards the professor, in their mincing gait, swinging their well-shaped hips imprisoned in tight jeans; as if they were that good old *Calamity Jane*³ heading for a gun duel

¹ By many music critics, *Ruhi Su* (1912–1985) was designated as “the Turkish equivalent” of the famous American black singer *Paul Leroy Robeson* (1898–1976) on one hand and the Argentinean singer-songwriter-guitarist *Atahualpa Yupanqui* (1908–1992), on the other hand. This information was provided at the back cover of one of his long plays, years ago.

² Until mid-1990s students of universities — the crushing majority of which were state universities — used to pay no tuition whatsoever, in Turkey. In 2012 the Parliament passed a law to restore the no-tuition-practice, after an interim period of a decade and a half.

³ The nickname of *Martha Jane Cannary* (1852–1903), an American frontierswoman, and professional scout (internet knowledge). She is depicted in some comic strips like *Lucky Luke*.

back in western times.

In perfect solidarity the female students objected to their exam grades, reclaiming five to ten points more out of hundred. The man blushed and defensively receded; trying to come up with soothing words like “you must have got only what you rightfully earned”. He looked as if trying to locate a safe corner to take shelter in. However; this same individual was transforming into a lion when confronting our Perpetual Student! No reason to be astonished: *P.P.* was totally dependent on him even for his registration renewals, to start with; and the professor knew how to emphasize his *trump*.

4. The Deceit Maneuver

The Advisor kept saying in his letters to get extra prolongation for the sake of his advisee. For the latter, a prolongation was the least required thing. Besides; if the test was “good enough” he should have go get his degree.

P.P. did realize the optional betterment studies, anyway. He added new passages. He changed the conclusion section entirely. He put more case stories and further extracts from literature to back up his points. All this he managed in a matter of a few months. Then he sent five copies of the ripest form of his dissertation to his advisor. This was an implication of his readiness for the appearance before a final jury. He was embarrassed to openly require the assembling of a final jury by the advisor. He had nothing else but to convince himself that he should wait on patiently, totally relying on his trust for the man.

5. The Former Attitude of the Advisor

While stationed at city α , *P.P.* in his spare time used to visit his professor in his university office and engage in scientific debates with him. When the professor run out of ideas, he was simply pointing to the door as if literally expulsing the aged student, while pronouncing his modest functionary job in a demeaning manner, emphasizing his otherness and difference with respect to most Ph.D. students (who were overwhelmingly young salaried research assistants). But what harm, anyway? *P.P.* got used to this treatment and stopped finding it strange. The advisee had a livable with, compatible character.

In actuality he had worked as a research assistant at the state university of the fourth most populated city of the country, just after completion of the military service (compulsory for all young and healthy Turkish male citizens). He had even made a publication there. He had to resign due to family matters. His professor was not aware of that academic professional history.

6. The Bitter Discovery of the Truth

While keyed to a long wait he sent the related fee and a petition to an acquaintance living in city α , requiring her to go get a new student identification card from the university administration. Only then it came to open that he had been dismissed without any warning or any official notification, a year ago. The friend told him on the phone.

The same day *P.P.* finally collected his courage to dial the home phone of the professor. A confrontation through the phone was finally inevitable, in his opinion, to get things clarified. After o short prologue, he asked about his thesis. The reply came from a laughing voice at the other end of the line. The man said that he had been

dismissed long ago. He teasingly went on: “Come on now! You aren’t going to cry, are you?” P.P. could detect the malign pleasure (*Schadenfreude*)⁴ the man felt so openly!

The former advisee contented with an expression of his regret, politely. He could not drop his internalized respect feelings even now. Right after ending the call, his mind worked out a Freudian analysis: This man could not have possibly put up with his advisee’s obtaining two degrees in his own field of study. Such a tolerance, he was merely unable to display.

Meanwhile; with some reserve; would it be too much to have some suspects regarding a probable plagiarism temptation (*Versuchung*), as well? Certain original ideas and affirmations in a dissertation work which does not acquire an official “immunity” through graduation, could indeed be extremely easy to appropriate by an individual working as a professional within this given field and used in the future. Was considering this possibility or probability such a wild fantasy?

7. Where was Academic Ethics and Integrity Gone in This “Game”?

No official writing or other form of notification came to P.P. concerning a dismissal. He had been ready to appear before an academic jury since at least two and a half years, with his completed work. He had been just waiting for that. He did not know the regulations regarding a Ph.D. attempt in detail but he did not even bother to learn them. He merely deemed it unnecessary. After all, in spite of everything he did have trust and confidence in his advisor. He did not deserve to be taken as a lazy student who did not submit a thesis or who gave an awful draft instead of a proper thesis.

As a universal rule, all transactions involving deceit are null and void. He could now see into the manipulative and tricky procedure of his advisor, openly. He was not even led before a jury. He remembered a couplet from the *Epic of Koroglu* [the son of the blind man], the legendary *rhapsode* and warrior (a sort of *Turkoman Robin Hood*): “*I am the son of a blinded man; I wonder on the hills/At times I sniff the odor of trickery in the blowing breeze!*” (“*Ben bir kör oğluyum; dağda gezerim/Esen rüzgârdan hile sezerim!*”). Alas; P.P. could not foresee the emergence of that fraud, beforehand!

8. The Waste of the Hard, Purposeful Academic Efforts

It can be inferred that the advisor was in expectation of out-of-university prestige through the dissertation topic he had imposed in a very insisting manner. He had been keen to catch the most convenient timing. Along the course of the delay; once the external conjecture came to change unexpectedly, the prospective intangible benefits were gone with the wind, in any case. Now; sheer graduation of his advisee was his least concern and he might as well get rid of him. His ego was much too swollen to take any action where a substantial gain for his own sake was out of question. Self-interest was his tremendous motive force and inspiration.

This selfish attitude of the man gave way to still another association in the mind of the advisee. In American English there is an idiom which talks about having an axe to grind. The idiom’s etymology can be traced back to the *Wild West Era*. Once an elderly wood chopper arrives in a small town. As a “nice old man” he fraternizes with the first encountered boy and asks for the address of a grinding workshop. The boy happily escorts him to the shop.

⁴ Here the German word is extremely appropriate to enrich the meaning. It is interesting to note that formerly I had seen the word in an article about the philosophy of sports in English! The author kept the original German word in the title as well as within the text. Indeed; it does vividly express the joy of the envious opponent over the bad situation he falls into. It has widening connotations.

The chopper makes his axe razor-sharp. He swings his valuable *gagne-pain* upon his shoulder. The two come out of the shop, the boy probably hoping for a tip. But what? The man looks as though he had gone through a complete metamorphosis. He is now blunt, rude, inconsiderate! He tells the boy to f*ck off and leave him alone. (Here the verb has other connotations which a euphemistic synonym like “*he told the boy to get out of his sight*” would not really equate). The disappointed boy goes tell his story everywhere, to get some relief and consolation, at least. Thereby the English language gains a new expression (recalled from the book titled *Words and Their Stories*).

P.P.’s own story is also a very meaningful anecdote which the academic world should be aware of. The adventure comprises a long interval, including the academic amnesty in-between. This very article in its first version put on paper in 2002 was a decade-long work already, seen from this point of view.

It is known that (famous lyric Turkish poet) *Yahya Kemal Beyatlı* wrote a specific poem of his in ten (!) long years, as well. The title was *Endülü’s te Raks (Dance in Andalusia)*. The master of poetry watches a *danseuse* in Madrid while stationed in that capitol as the ambassador of the new Turkish Republic. A few stanzas inspired by the terrific beauty are noted down on a slip of paper by the poet and later get forgotten. Ten years later, now in his beautiful home city Istanbul, one day the poet encounters a similar ambiance and the spirit moves him to recall and this time finish off the lyrical eulogy. Great composer *Münir Nurettin Selçuk* was to take those words and compose them in an unforgettable classical song.

9. Conclusion

P.P. had suffered a lot because of that professor. Still he did not fall into the mistake of demonizing the man. He is well aware that the man is only human, with his goodness and badness, weakness and strength. Being a target of his envious feeling even alleviated his suffering to some extent.

If one is to experience (*erleben*) a vigorous conflict, the opponent might as well be a scholar. As (the great medieval mystical Persian poet) *Omar Khayyam* puts it: “Go ahead trinket the gift from the hand of a wise one/And spill off the syrup submitted by an ignorant!” (in the Turkish version: “*İç âkil elinden zehri!!Cahilin şerbetin yerlere saç!*”). As the Tunisian social scholar *Ibn Khaldun* determined it way back in the fourteenth century; the defeated wishes to resemble the winner! A strong rival can at times even furnish his own victim with a progressive impulse and inspiration. The Russian Tsar Peter the Great said “we learned how to win eventually by getting beaten many a times”.

Writer *Sait Faik Abasıyanık* immortalized a true villain, ship steward *İrfan* from *Burgazada (The Marmara Island of Antigoni)*, because of his anger, in one of his novels. In quite a similar fashion, that advisor, in this story-like article assumes the role of a chief character thanks to the hurt feelings of an indignant perpetual student.

Putting this particular academic adventure on black and white is a kind of good-willed *whistle blowing*, which is far different from “snitching”. The latter is contaminated with primitive grudge while the former represents a noble and courageous warning for the betterment of the society for the days to come. Those who take pioneering roles in combat against unethical procedures in all respects should go ahead and encourage more people in their cause so that results can be obtained on the greater scale.

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