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«Excellence in Stupidity. Auto-ethnography of two Portuguese Anthropology Departments during Implementation of Bologna Process»

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I. Introductory Note

Not since the writings of Lucien Lévy-Bruhl have anthropologists let themselves worry much about the place of ilogicality in human collective thought. In fact, even their own logical failures have frequently passed unnoticed, or have tended to be brushed aside as irrelevant shortcomings of otherwise sound arguments (Gomes da Silva, 2003).

The lack of attention given by post-war anthropological discourses to collective stupidity and to logical paradoxes – itself not a sign of deep analytical intelligence – derives, possibly, from the pressing need to formulate exalting harmonic views of groupal intelligence in societies that had been historically catalogued in negative terms (within the evolutionist framework of the nineteenth century, which had somewhat lingered in the colonial anthropology of the first half of the twentieth century).

The levi-straussian (and boasian) utopianist obsession regarding *la pensée sauvage* has pervaded anthropological tradition in such way that, even when most of that heritage was shaken by post-colonial and post-modernist viewpoints, its core concepts were never seriously questioned. The idea that a *deus ex machine* hiding behind human social actions from which order and intelligence flows unstoppably has proven its attractability and overpowering strength, even in the face of researches into violence, deterioration, and culture loss. Moreover, criticism of this model in the context of inquiries on human collective cognition – which, as in the case of Jack Goody's research about orality and literacy –hasn't risen from a dismissive attitude, anchored in the spiritual resurrection of the likes of James George Frazer and Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, and the old evolutionist apparatus.

Anthropology is not solely to blame for this state of affairs. As Alain Roger (2008) aptly notes, stupidity and imbecility *(connerie, dumheit)* have historically received little attention from Western philosophers. This much had actually also been noticed by Herbert Musil (1937), in his brief essay on the matter. Writers, by vocation, psychologists, by trade, and (unadmitedly) historians, because they have to deal with the

sequential effects of idiotic decisions in human societies, seem to have the ones more systematically concerned with the issues of irrationality, ilogicality and plain stupidity.

Considering the hypothesis that an *anthropology of stupidity* is of programmatic urgency for the development of a critical, and self-critical, investigation into human collective thought and practices, we argue that researchers should start this endeavour by looking inward, into their academic activities, and into their teaching frameworks. The present paper is but a preliminary effort in that direction – and not a particularly intelligent one, for that matter.

We understand that such task is hard to the point of un-achievability, given not only the weight of the afore-mentioned discursive and postural tradition in anthropology, but also the present situation of academia. Our view is that the University, that has given meaning to the disciplinary propositions from which different strains of anthropological thought were allowed to thrive, is not simply in crisis, but is basically dead.

A University that permits free thought to flow into the classroom and into the literary and scientific productions is today unacceptable, given the business model that is being universally adopted (in Europe under the guise of the so-called Bologna Process). We share with other colleagues the idea that such model is founded on an empty ideology - that of excellence (Readings, 1996) - in which viability, evaluation and accountancy have successfully managed to push critical thought to the background of academic work (Jourde, 2007).

However, since we are in a foreign country, far from the inquisitorial eye of our university administrators and from the denouncing impulses of our pairs, we have allowed ourselves this possibly pointless exercise. We should also point out that we feel fortunate enough that stupidity is so easy to unearth in our country. This may regrettably mean that the results of our brief inquiry may not be directly expandable to other national contexts. Still, the insight of Carlo Cipolla's second law of human stupidity[1] that reminds us this peculiar characteristic of Man's mind is not limited to national borders, genders or social classes, gives us hope that you may translate at least some of elements of our report into your own academic realities.

[1] *The probability that a certain person be stupid is independent of any other characteristic of that person* (Cipolla, 1987: 3)

II. Portuguese Academic Context

As a starting point to examine the implementation of the Bologna Process in two Portuguese anthropology departments, as well as the effects those reforms are producing at University level, let us take a glance over some key features of the Portuguese Education System.

This approach is based on the OECD review (commissioned by the Portuguese Ministry of Science, Technology and Higher Education) and recently published (OECD, 2006).

Low education attainment of the population

Despite massive expansion of education since the revolution in 1974, educational attainment of the adult population in Portugal remains rather low (…). Compared internationally, the number of years of schooling of the working-age populations is among the lowest in the OECD, with Portugal ranking next to Turkey and Mexico.

Also there as been limited progress between one generation and the next, in contrast with what has occurred in another countries, such as Spain, Italy, Greece or Korea.

Low level of post-secondary level attainment

Albeit experiencing a massive expansion of higher education over the last two decades, the level of attainment of the population remains among the lowest in the OECD. Nevertheless, this increase in university enrolment numbers peaked in 2001/2002 and thereafter a slight decline is observed. The main reason for this decrease in student enrolment comes from Portugal demographic development, which like other European countries is experiencing declining birth rates over the last decades. Taking the period 1991-2006, the population in age group 15-17, for instance, has fallen circa 12%.

Apart from this demographic factor, another problem underlined in OECD report is that «…the percentage of cohort that fails to graduate also exhibits the highest rates of school dropouts, from the 9^{th} to the12^{th} year of schooling (…). The dropout rates are among the highest in OECD, while performance of the children who stay in school is one of the weakest, as measured by international literacy assessment (OECD-PISA) (OECD, 2006:13)».

Network of higher education institutions

As regards higher education institutions, the expansionist period, starting during post-revolution era and continuing during last two decades generated a large number of

institutions [30 Universities and 130 Polytechnic Schools][2] catering to a relatively small number of students. With hindsight, as OECD observers report, «until the 1990's the tertiary system was growing and expanding and there were sufficient candidates for every institution. The decline in the number of candidates has been felt most keenly by private institutions and more recently by public polytechnics and even by some public universities located in interior region» (OECD, 2006: 14, 15).

Expansionism and quality outputs

For a small country like Portugal, with a total population around 10 Million inhabitants, this is certainly a quite dense network of university institutions. Therefore, while enrolment figures have expanded enormously, completion has increased much less, pointing to very high drop out and failure rates. We can list several reasons for these poor results, ranging from the low efficiency of some institutions to the low competences of entering students. Quality also varies across institutions, Universities being more selective than polytechnics and mostly providing better quality teaching. Public universities have been selecting students [through *numerus clausus* system] and charge moderate fees. They tend to have the best students, either due to the opportunity cost of continuing studies, or because they were those performing the best in secondary schooling.

Access and participation according to age and sex

Until recently, older students are significantly absent from University. Lifelong education is still a relatively underdeveloped area of the Portuguese education system. According to data from 2004/05, the number of students over 25 years of age that entered higher education through special examinations represented only 1.1% of total first year enrolments. With the implementation of Bologna process, we can see that this scenario is changing. Aiming to encourage candidates to higher education, the Government reduced the age criterion to 23 and gave full responsibility to institutions to select their students, abolishing the national exams as a basis for selection.

[2] Like many OECD countries, two kinds of institutions dominate higher education level: universities and polytechnics. Both sectors can be public or private. The public university systems includes 14 public universities (Open University included) and ISCTE (a non-integrated school). The public polytechnics network is composed of 15 polytechnic institutes and some polytechnic schools, recently integrated in the universities. There are also many other private institutions (105), most of them specialized (teacher training, media studies, management, marketing, etc…). Average size around 1000 students, but with great variations, being some of them rather small - 30% with enrolments below 200 students; and 35% with enrolments between 200 and 500, according to 2003 data.

Accompanying the tendency observed in many OECD countries, also in Portugal women have made significant gains in participation at higher education level. This follows from the higher success rate of female students in compulsory education and in upper secondary education. Nowadays, females are a majority in every degree programme, except the more technological ones.

III. Anthropology Study Programmes

In this context, when we focus the evolution of the anthropology study programmes in the country, it was only from the late 1970s, after the fall of the authoritarian regime, that the conditions were created for the effective development of specialized university teaching in different fields of the social sciences.

We can trace, then, during this period the appearance of the first specialized degree programmes in Anthropology (social and cultural anthropology), all in Lisbon [UNL, 1977; ISCSP, 1981, ISCTE, 1982].

Our experience of students and lectures in two of the largest departments of Anthropology in the country – UNL and ISCTE – from these first steps to the ethnographic present – will allow us to reflect on some recent trends and transformations, with the privileged and dangerous view of being inevitably inside and part of the scene. We agree with Spradley when he says that «the more you know about a situation as a common observer, the more difficult it is to study it as an ethnographer» (Spradley, 1980: 61).

Since the inception of the first Anthropology programmes, years of expansion would follow, that were to be found mainly at two levels: demographic (students and staff); curricular (new study programmes; creation of masters' degree in Anthropology).

The demographic expansion was reflected, first of all, on the increasing number of candidates that during the 80's and 90's applied for an anthropology programme. While the first years of UNL and ISCTE departments gather 25-30 students per year, the *numerus clausus* of both programmes rapidly increased to 60-70. Therefore, not only the number of candidates increased during this period, but also did the number of places offered in each of these anthropology departments.

Accompanying this movement, new staff (lectures, invited specialists, administrative) found a job at University and the first graduates had great chances of initiating a

university career in the recently created departments. As we have initially referred, this situation has completely changed, and nowadays, the number of applicant students is in accentuated retraction and University Departments have long ago stabilised their staff quotas.

Similar expansionist trends characterises the history of curricular implementation and restructuring, attaining its pick with Bologna process, as we will illustrate below:

New anthropology programmes were offered in other public and private Universities [Coimbra, Oporto, Miranda do Douro, Lusófona]. Also anthropology courses were integrated in several Social Sciences programmes [Universidade da Beira Interior; Universidade do Minho, UTAD, Instituto Piaget, Escola Superior de Comunicação Social, etc] and new masters degree were offered by the main Universities [UNL, ISCTE, Universidade de Coimbra, Universidade do Minho, Universidade Católica, etc].

However, after those initial years of expansion, anthropology teaching has been forced to adapt, on one hand, to a massive rise in the number of students and, on the other hand, to severe restrictions as regards new academic posts (with many retired professors not being substituted and guest professors having their contracts ceased).

This situation led to what we could call an unusual restructuring obsession as the main feature that characterises recent history of our anthropology departments, having dominated great part of local scientific debates and synergies. Sterile quarrels and individual strategies were made visible throughout these turbulent years, with important repercussion either in academic life or in the curricula profile.

Just to give an example, in the department of anthropology at UNL, the anthropology degree programme changed five times between 1981 and 2006 [this last one according to Bologna Process], with the last three reforms concentrating in the last period of 10 years]. At ISCTE, although experiencing several attempts to restructure the curriculum, all of them were fruitless, except the one that took place under Bologna process.

IV. Bologna process – 2006

Bologna process sudden became a slogan, echoing in almost every higher education institution one or two years before its implementation in 2006. It was clearly a top-down reform, whose proponent had no name, but was been assimilate to a profile of a collective European agreement that sounded like a plate of pasta. Nonetheless, Bologna

advocates argue that it represents a unique opportunity to bring excellence to Portuguese Universities.

How was then brought this excellence in the case of anthropology teaching? For the Social Sciences, a commission of representatives was created that was supposed to produce a memorandum with position of the social sciences national group towards the undergoing Bologna reform. But neither the commission was recognised as representing anybody, nor anybody would recognize himself in the anodyne documents produced by the commission.

Besides this, the debate took place within the departments; where the main concepts that structured Bologna process was reduce to bizarre formulas and unusual abbreviations – Expressions like“3+1” or “4+1” or even “3+1+1”; “ECTS”; “SW”; “DP” [and others…] were used and abused, most part of the time totally empty of significance.

And after hours of discussions around “3+2”; “4+1”; the inevitable decision was already on the table – Social Sciences degree programmes, that according to Portuguese education tradition lasted 4 years, would be reduced to only three, followed by a two-year master degree. No matter what arguments pro or against could be adduce. Tuning, uniformising, measuring [everything: work of the student, hours of formal teaching, number of project written pages; duration of formal exams, informal evaluation, pages to be read…] were the main action verbs that dominated academic discourse at that time.

Then the nightmare of formularies to fulfil began. Every detail of the academic year should be anticipated, planned according to specific objectives and expected competencies, reduced to texts with defined limits of characters, measured in particular units of time, classified according to a grid previous exhibited and, of course, all supported by European comparability.

To assure the excellence of the Reform, new commissions would born – at the top, the ECTS commission, for example, was charged of assuring that every course didn’t overpass 6 ECTS, and that an undergraduate degree programme would totalize 180 ECTS.

Recently institutionalized, anthropology teaching resulted from a mix of francophone tradition, plus the input of American top bookshelves in the most popular bookshops, with most curricular changes (or proposals of changes) relying on the hands of department members under immediate circumstances.

The first consequence was paradigmatic of the inconsistent practices and discourses that affected the process of decision-making – the compression of degrees implied, in very practical terms, that some courses would have to drop out, while others would have to be revised to adapt to Bologna formats. Curiously, in our departments what would drop out and what would be maintained was never a scientific or pedagogic concern. In the lack of consensus and truly scientific arguments to support the debate around what needed to be restructured, it would be the number of fingers raised pro or against inconsistent renewal proposals that prevailed.

Thus, it was in the middle of turbulent and simultaneously empty discussions and erratic reasoning that new curricula began to emerge. "Foundation of" or "Introductory" courses of whatever classic domains of anthropology were seen as old fashion so, they would either drop out or be dismissed from "compulsory" to "optional" courses. Then, new courses have been proposed, with a thematic profile [a simple "comma" or preposition "and" in-between, would link no matter what convenient subject gatherings]. Once again, the absence of consensus and scientific justification reflected in the vacuity and erratic solutions for the newborn courses that compound the emergent study programmes.

All this "excellence" was accomplished under what could be called the Bologna process fallacies:

1st fallacy: modern study programmes are now "student-oriented"…

If it was difficult to find consensus and scientific criterion between academics, imagine if the students took part in the discussions and innumerably meetings that occurred during restructuring process…

And what exactly was meant by the required "student-orientation"? Was it that it would be build by the student? Or should it be build according to what academics think was the point of view of the student? Or else, was it the result of a survey about students' expectations towards the different courses? And in the base of all hypothesis whose student are we talking about? Even so, considering the time gap between an eventual survey and the application of the results, the student whose expectations were being surveyed had certainly already left university…

Besides this, was also propagating that it is the work of students that matters and not the "passive" transmission of knowledge by the lecturer…Thus, giving a formal lecture becomes obsolete and old-fashioned. Actually, the "good" teacher is rather the one who

never prepares a lecture to deliver, but just listens to students "active" transmission of their "mature" knowledge, through individual or small group presentations that occur in class seminars, most of the time with total absence of their own colleagues participation.

2nd fallacy: mobility and ECTS

Related with the idea of *student-oriented* programmes comes the fallacy of flexibility and mobility through the European credit transfer system that, in our case, rapidly ceased to be a *transfer* system to become *the system*. Each course would represent a specific number of credits and the sum of a specific amount of credits will originate a diploma (180 ECTS = 1st cycle; 120 ECTS = Master; 240 ECTS = PhD…).

Nevertheless, if there is a different understanding of how to attribute credits to courses, a student might see his/her diplomas in danger if the total amounts of the credits realized do not reach exactly the pre-established quantitative plafond, or even if they overpass its limits. This situation, actually, has the great probability of occurring when we think in terms of different institutions or different countries. Paradoxically the system was conceived precisely to allow that differences between institutions (national and international) do not affect potential student mobility…

3rd fallacy: employability

Under the noble principle of "employability", Universities were expected to promote dialogue with civil society (especially with enterprises and potential employers) in order to restructure their study programmes to produce *employable* students.

The political idea of professionalizing implies, then, that we substitute a disciplinary teaching by a specialized one, which ideally means that study programmes adapt to market punctual necessities and expectations. Nothing more mismatching than this third fallacy, very easily deconstructed. How is it possible that the University can be able to form their students according to punctual exigencies with some years in advance? Considering that a minimum of 5 years would be need, from the first needs assessment to the implementation of new study programmes, do we expect that the enterprises and future employers would be able to anticipate in 5 years, or even more, their own needs?

Most of the time the tendency has been to interpret what academics think are the "market needs", according to ephemeral fashions, that in anthropology had generated a sort of patchwork of different thematic courses, inevitably delivered at a very elementary level in order to capture a vast public. The paradox of this pseudo-

specialization is a complete fragmentation of disciplinary teaching, trivialized and simplified, and delivered in a time record.

Semestralisation of the courses, compression of degrees and shortage in the number of project and thesis' pages being the immediate expressions of this acceleration. However, what are the gains towards excellence? We all know that knowledge transmission requires time and it is very true that knowledge is not something that we can simplify to attract audiences…

Bologna advocates leave the idea that everything should be simplified, adequate to the competences and expectations of the students, or in other words, generalised or superficially approached. With these objectives, new study programmes profiles will incorporate what is intended to be worth and useful and exclude what is not. In short time, the study programmes that are becoming less attractive and popular risking to be defined as "non-employable" and soon extinct. Thus, under the leitmotif of employability and simplification there is a tendency to drop out "old fashion", "useless" disciplines, such as philosophy (what for?), medieval history (who is interested in?) or linguistics (who cares?)…

V. Final remarks

Through this brief impressionist view, we may conclude with Carlo Cipolla (1987) that stupidity is as prevalent in the University as it is in any other social institution. Thus, anthropologists dealing with the university "reform" should not underestimate that inconsistent practices and discourses disturb widespread assumptions that institutions are nurture by reason. With hindsight, we have taken some features of the Bologna process in two Portuguese anthropology departments as an illustration of the ways erratic reasoning that might affect decision-making.

While "Bologna advocates " sustain that it represents a unique opportunity to bring "excellence" to Portuguese universities, on the contrary, we argue that we are dealing with a progressive simplification, resulting in an accelerated de-characterization of academic work, that is being politically appropriated with severe effects in teaching and research.

According to new standards, in fact, as Annika and Susan underline, university is not expecting to produce meaning but to become more business like. This raises troubling

questions about the changing concept of University, but most scholars in Portugal failed to address them, instead adopting a submissive attitude towards undergoing changes. With the aim of enhancing "competence", "quality" and "excellence" in higher education, a reform was top-down imposed, burocratically implemented, acritically accepted and almost not reflected.

This leads us to question the end of the University as a place where creative thought is produced and encouraged. In other words, we have always taken with suspicion that excellence would ever been mass-produced, uniformly spread through blind rules or developed according to job market. As Jean-Fabien Spitz so vividly remarks in *University: La grande illusion* when addressing to recent French reform in higher education: «Freedom is sine qua non condition of all innovative thought. Political authorities, who will not accept this with all their obsession of control and uniformity, are about to sterilise research after having already destroyed teaching…» (Jourde, 2007: 114).

Just to conclude, answering Annika and Susan challenges, we as anthropologists have dealt (and will deal) with some difficulties in the exploration of the nature of the changes that follow Bologna process in our own departments, as our descriptions and observations are far from being neutral. For that reason, we could only produce impressionistic views, framed by our own selective memory and experiences.

Nevertheless, we think that anthropologists that take necessary distance are very well equipped to study this sort of phenomenon. Such distance could be achieved, for instance, within the framework of European exchange programmes (like Erasmus-Socrates). Actually, those programmes could be used as a privileged opportunity for students and teachers, that are studying or teaching abroad, engage in participant observation at the departments they are visiting.

Such ethnographic studies will certainly contribute to our better understanding of the dynamics through which European academic life is passing, as well as to the strategies that are being used in order to respond to political pressures. In this case, no doubt remains about the usefulness of anthropological knowledge.

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