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Discourses of crisis and academia: Debating impacts on practices, values and identities

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The University as an idea, as a project, is being transformed. What are its specificities in the present days? Do universities still have a public task? What are the appropriate functions of higher education? What are the purposes of teaching and research? What counts as relevant knowledge and what counts as an appropriate higher education? Is the age of Universities (late 11th c. – early 21st c.) in the West getting to a close? Whose discourses are achieving dominance?

Meanings related to the identity, principles and practices of the university have been reworked in profound and contradictory ways, generating tensions and disputes within the university and in its relations with the state and society. It is true that the questioning of the university is probably as old as the idea of the university itself, but we have been living through an amplification of this phenomenon at least since the 1990s, as exemplified by a number of scholarly reflections from that period. In Portugal, Boaventura Sousa Santos wrote then about the triple crisis of the university: a crisis of hegemony, a crisis of legitimacy and an institutional crisis (Santos, 1989). In Canada, Bill Readings published an analysis of the University of Ruins (Readings, 1996) whereas in Brazil, Helgio Trindade edited a book where several scholars discussed the present and the future of the Brazilian university (Trindade, 1999). In Britain, Sheila Slaughter and Larry L. Leslie analyzed what they termed “Academic Capitalism” (Slaughter & Leslie, 1997) and Jeffrey Williams, in the USA, wrote that we had awakened to a brave new world of the university (Williams, 1999).

It is not only the idea of the university that has been a focus of debate, but also entire higher education systems at the national and international levels (Neave & Amaral, 2012; Antunes, 2006; Ball, 1998; Fejes, 2008; Sader et al, 2008; Trindade, 2003; Zgaga, 2007), the life of diverse institutions of contemporary higher education (Göransson & Brundenius, 2011), the academic profession (Kogan & Teichler, 2007), as well as the actual practices of academic “tribes” and their disciplinary territories (Becher & Trowler, 2001; Strathern, 2000).

As academics in a public university of a European peripheral country, not doing research in the field of education nor reflecting in a systematic way about its fades and dawns, our interests in these matters has been fueled by the practicalities of a daily life as teachers and researchers (increasingly constrained by ever-growing administrative tasks). Academics

have for long been challenged in one way or another by the phenomenon of mass higher education and the multiple problems linked to it. Since the mid-1990s,¹ however, there has been a progressive decrease in the number of candidates for higher education in Portugal and subsequently an increasing competition among universities. Under market-like conditions, universities have adopted survival strategies not always consistent with the pursuit of the public good (Amaral & Magalhães, 2007). Starting with the Bologna Process (1999), which was presented as a *fait accompli* and lived as such in the Portuguese public universities, successive university reforms, together with the more recent rounds of budget cuts in public financing of universities and of research, have had huge effects on the daily lives of academic staff, throwing us in a sea of contradictions, continuous pressures and urgencies. In Trowler's words we have been "sinking", "swinging", "reconstructing" and "coping" (Trowler, 1998) according to the circumstances, but there is no time to stop and think about "what is going on here?"

How are we dealing with these challenges that are at once obstructive, destructive and creating new opportunities? We need to make a pause, to look in the mirror. After all, we are "responding" in whatever we do. Auditors can be shown to be "us" (Brenneis, 1994). As one of our interviewee writes, evoking Yeats, "how can we know the dancer from the dance? Academics and researchers are not only playing the game, but also, at least some of them, nourishing it" (Magalhães, this volume). If there is a trait that distinguishes the university from other institutions it is its capacity to think in long terms (Santos, 2005; 2011), to discuss and imagine other possible worlds, to cultivate discussion (Jaspers, 1960), the conversation of the human kind (Oakeshott, 2004), to interrogate critically (Barnett, 1997) both itself and society. But how does one "think in an institution whose developments tend to make thought more and more difficult, less and less necessary" (Readings, 1996: 175)? How does one think in an institution that is "killing thinking" (Evans, 2004)? How does one think in an environment where "almost everything academics are now asked to do, most of them believe to be wrong" (Russell, 1992: 109)? We are too busy with deadlines, evaluations, accreditations, outputs, neurotic platforms' demands, juggling for excellence, efficiency and students, chasing the euro and fame, surviving in a world of academic Mcjobs (Martins, H., 2004) or simply looking for a job. This seems to be the adequate terrain for self-destruction in a globalized higher education context driven by market forces inasmuch as we seem unable to formulate reality in different terms and "make sense together" by "joining the dots".

Some analysts argue that scholars are "captured by the discourse" (Bowe et al, 1994) of the "University of Excellence-as-business", "of maximum Throughput" (Martins, H., 2004), with far reaching consequences as there is little room to challenge this new common sense effectively and in a way that resonates with society's concerns. But as Castells reminds us, universities are subject to "the conflicts and contradictions of society and therefore they will tend to express – and even to amplify – the ideological struggles present in all societies" (Castells, 2001: 212). Discourse is a major resource of these struggles. Its nature is never fixed once and for all but always in flux, invisible and taken-for-granted in some situations, strategically used and/or openly challenged in others. Higher education and its institutions

¹ Some authors have identified discrete phases from the 1990s onwards (see Amaral & Magalhães, 2009).

are struck by the cross-currents of the state, the market and civil society. Demand overload is a daily experience of institutions in a context of increasing scarcity of resources (financial, human and others). Simultaneously, they must remain faithful to the “public good” ideals of higher education. In addition, universities are dialogical entities in the sense that they are composed of multiple discourses and a plurality of community of practices (Trowler, 2001: 18). The fact that certain expectations and demands are voiced more loudly and more often than others reminds us that universities need to address the current situation in principled, creative and strategic ways. They need to recognize the legitimacy of certain claims and to refute others that could reduce them to something other than a university. Subjected to the dictatorship of any only way of thinking, the university becomes useless (Nóvoa, 2012: 635). Semiotic democracy requires “engagement, struggle and considerable ‘work’” (Trowler 2001: 32). It does not just happen by itself or by magic.

One way to go down this path is through a conversation with our fellow scholars in order to know their opinions on key issues of the current debate on higher education and research. It is by now common sense that there is a global tendency towards a market-oriented reform of universities and education systems, pressured by a number of structural changes frequently described in terms such as neo-liberal globalization, the information age, the rise of the knowledge-based economy and the learning society. Universities in many regions of Europe can currently be described as being in a state of crisis, suffering an acute lack of funding and going through money-saving reorganizations, struggling with the new “rituals of verification” (Power, 1999) and with providing knowledge and education that meet the changing needs of their surrounding society and economy. While there is a general trend (Amaral, 2010), experiences in different countries, institutions, disciplinary domains and academic milieus by different individuals will of course vary. Using an opportunity generated by the organization of the *Fourth International Conference of Critical Approaches to Discourse Analysis Across Disciplines* at the University of Minho, Braga, in July 2012, we engaged in a process of interviewing some of our fellow academics. We wanted to gather their opinions on the use of crisis discourses in higher education and research, particularly on its institutional recontextualisation (at the European Union and national levels, as well as at universities and research centres) in the social sciences and humanities fields, and the implications of these processes for the role of the state, the power and role of academics, the character of research, and for the relations between central and peripheral European universities.

We first interviewed four keynote speakers invited for this conference. This group included academics in senior positions and younger scholars, working in different institutions of higher education in Europe (Spain and United Kingdom), with a variety of backgrounds, experiences, interests and institutional positions, but all doing research in the field of Discourse Studies. In a second moment, we added another group of four interviewees, in order to cover more disciplines, to include academics from our own country and academics that due to their research interests and/or to their professional positions are involved in institutional policy-making, its implementation and/or its analysis.²

² Five interviews took a semi-structured form, lasted between an hour and an hour and a half, were tape recorded and fully transcribed. In the other three, interviewees António Magalhães, Johannes Angermüller and Moisés de Lemos Martins responded in writing to a set of questions (this option was due to a lack of resources to conduct interviews afar).

This quest was restricted to the social sciences and humanities domains, a *parti-pris* explained by our belief that these disciplinary fields tend to be considered dysfunctional (Lima, 2010; Martins, M. L., 2004) within the currently dominant market-oriented prescriptions of “relevance”, “efficiency”, “accountability” and “quality” (Power, 2000; Shore & Wright, 1999). This has had a profound impact on these fields’ institutional financing, position, and organization, as well as on teaching and research practices, but more fundamentally it has affected their own identity and role, expressed by a general concern with the future of the social sciences and humanities’ academic practices, and the future of the type of enquiry that they promote (Soeiro & Tavares, 2012; CCCSH, 2012; Nóvoa, 2012).

At the time of writing, crucial policy developments offered contradictory signs for the future of the social sciences and humanities in Europe. The new European Union Framework Programme for Research and Innovation, Horizon 2020, is said to respond to a “key challenge”: to “stabilise the financial and economic system while taking measures to create economic opportunities” (European Commission, 2013a). The EU research policy is now openly at the service of the corporate world:

“Horizon 2020 is the financial instrument implementing the Innovation Union, a Europe 2020 flagship initiative aimed at securing Europe’s global competitiveness. (...) Horizon 2020 will tackle societal challenges by helping to bridge the gap between research and the market by, for example, helping innovative enterprise to develop their technological breakthroughs into viable products with real commercial potential. This market-driven approach will include creating partnerships with the private sector and Member States to bring together the resources needed.” (European Commission, 2013b)

Solving the financial crisis thus becomes the official mission and *leitmotiv* of new knowledge quests.

In this context, we can only anticipate further constraints for research that does not offer (economic) “growth” prospects. However, the recently agreed Vilnius Declaration – Horizons for Social Sciences and Humanities, whose Steering Committee was headed by Helga Nowotny, the current president of the European Research Council, posits that those areas are “indispensable in generating knowledge about the dynamic changes in human values, identities and citizenship that transform our societies”. Writing in *The Guardian*, Nowotny (2013) offers a different interpretation of Horizon 2020 saying that it “reflects a strikingly different approach to developments across the Atlantic. In the United States, the social sciences and humanities are under attack. In Europe, we are committed to integrating the natural sciences, engineering, and social sciences and humanities, aiming to foster better, more valuable research.” The shape and consequences of this “integration” are yet to be seen. The extent to which the social sciences and humanities can continue to serve the “project of democratization” (Giroux, 2009: 669) and “what we might call the humanistic aspects of science and social science – the imaginative, creative aspect, and the aspect of rigorous critical thought” (Nussbaum, 2010: 2) is, for now, unknown.

In any discussion about the future of the university, the risk of being caught in a straight-jacketed thinking is real, with calls for reality on one side, and for the mythical golden age on the other. On way to escape this is to engage in a dialectical exercise between

accepting imposing solutions and taking a principled stand: “ideals that have no realistic prospect of coming about are worthless; survival, even prosperity that is not in any way determined by critically chosen goals cannot count as success” (Graham, 2005: 5). In other words, we recognize the importance of striking a balance between extremes and we think that there are good opportunities for learning from each other’s experiences.

Our interviewees do not necessarily agree on their analysis of the uses of crisis discourses in higher education and research, but we found nevertheless a fair amount of consensus. Below, we summarize the most important topics covered in their answers, with an emphasis on the commonalities in the interviews.

All the academics linked the current crisis discourse in higher education and research with the global economic and financial crisis, with major restrictions in higher education budgets, and with the reinforcement of the profit-oriented university. Some connected these changes to a wider political agenda and to long-term societal trends associated with the erosion of the welfare state, the shift to an “evaluative state” (Neave, 1988), and the dominance of neo-liberal ideals across the globe.

They express their concern with the impact of these changes on the enduring identity crisis of higher education, on the ways of running universities and research centres, on the nature of the education provided and the knowledge produced, on the geopolitics of knowledge, on the geopolitical relations between universities, as well as the effects of these changes on students and on access to higher education.

Some of our interviewees claim that the present crisis has reinforced the hegemony of the economic discourse and its related counterpart, the discourse of managerialism. According to them, the shift towards the market pole came with the reinforcement of institutional autonomy. Less centralized power has resulted in the increment of accountability exercises – reduced to quantification and measurement or “coercive commensurability” (Shore and Wright, 2000) – and in the demand for relevance – reduced to “value for money”. This seems particularly evident in the case of countries like the UK, which have experimented profound neo-liberal reforms. These regulatory mechanisms, says one of our interviewees, act through steering at a distance, that is, controlling what academic staff think and do in a disguised manner (Angermüller, this volume), and, more importantly, turning them “into self-managing individuals who render themselves auditable” (Shore and Wright, 2000: 57).

The interviewees relate the introduction of entrepreneurialism into the academic scene – due not only to external forces, but also to internal academic dynamics – with positive and negative developments. The fact that evaluation criteria to recruit academic staff is getting more demanding is seen as a positive step inasmuch as it introduces open forms of competition for jobs, counteracting endogenous tendencies. Regarding research, the withdrawal of the state from higher education, in the shape of funding cuts, is seen by some as a potentially positive change considering that in the past it was sometimes associated “with giving particular guidelines to research, fostering or promoting certain areas of research” (Krzyżanowski, this volume) and that it may contribute to fostering scholars’ interest in the social relevance of research. The pressure towards internationalization is pointed out as positive, as long as it stands for solidary cooperation, which is seen as fundamental to

research advancements. Another positive effect is that this demand may prevent or reduce the risks implied in a strictly national and “often parochial way of doing research” (idem).

Some academics recognize the hegemony of the English language in scientific production, but they also stress its “functional aspects”: it enables “networking, collaborations and interdisciplinarity” (idem) as long as it works as a more international language “that is no longer controlled by the natives” (Marín-Arrese, this volume).

Nevertheless, the emphasis in the interviews is on the risks and negative effects of the profound institutional transformation in the university and its environments upon individual and collective identities, teaching, research, working conditions and conditions of thought, and also upon students. The consecutive rounds of financial cuts to higher education institutions means, for some of the interviewees, less research and thus raising unemployment among young lecturers and among prospective researchers that do not get scholarships, including those that have completed a PhD: for example, “thousands of them in Spain are now leaving the country” (van Dijk, this volume); “what our politicians do today is advise young people to leave the country (Portugal), to emigrate” (Martins, this volume). Those cuts have been leading to rising fees because universities now depend more on students’ payment to survive. This tendency is seen as dangerous for several reasons: it may lead to a decrease in students’ applications; it is placing them in an escalating debt situation; it is furthering inequalities of access and participation in higher education; and it does not mean that the quality of education is raised. As one of our interviewees says, “you can’t raise the quality of education by turning students into fee-paying customers. On the contrary, to get the best possible students and results, you need to pay them. This is especially clear with PhD students (...). Yet if you make them pay, you attract those for whom academic diplomas need to have pay off sometime. In the long run, this kills higher education since it needs people who do teaching and research for its own sake” (Angermüller, this volume). According to the interviewees, cuts in state-funding may also lead to: the creation or the strengthening of status hierarchies between universities; the closure of universities that recruit from working classes students; a concentration of academic prestige and power in a few elite institutions and countries, marginalizing more peripheral countries and pushing their specific education programmes and research projects to the fringes of the European higher education and research area. The case of Portugal is exemplary in this regard. As Martins (this volume) argues, for over twelve years, the Portuguese state has been imposing on researchers international “help” with research through the Portuguese Science and Technology Foundation (FCT) (“international” means predominantly from an Anglo-Saxon geo-cultural area). “This international “help” in research (with language, with the questions to deal with, with the assessment teams, and with the theoretical models it follows), required by the Portuguese government (via FCT) is all too similar to that of a country dependent upon “external financial assistance”. Also in science the situation is that of financial “rescue”, with the European Commission, as the funding institution, establishing the way of doing science, and the Portuguese government, in a submissive attitude, following external interests instead of the interests of the Portuguese community”.

Some of the academics question the efficacy of auditing procedures for achieving the aim of high quality mass higher education. They highlight the trend towards a growing

evaluative bureaucracy with high transaction costs and unclear benefits. According to Martins (this volume) this growing bureaucracy means that “the university has decided to deny itself. It denies itself by organising regular consultations with students to register their opinions about their professors and the courses’ syllabi. It denies itself, when all it wants to do is communicate, listen, when it wants pedagogy and supervision, and neglects its obligation to teach.” Other academics claim that in the evaluation and assessment of applications for research funding the concern with quality is not carried into the analysis of content and rigor of academic work. Rather, the concern is with external mechanisms by which such work is valued, that is, the reputation of researchers as seen, for instance, through the journals in which they publish. For some of the interviewees this situation acts to the advantage of the Anglo-Saxon academy and implies the reduction of intellectual diversity. They pointed out that this criterion, which is seen as imported from the “hard” sciences, is specially pungent for the humanities, an area where publishing a monograph is seen as harder work and traditionally more prestigious. Based on an ongoing research project, one of the academics that we interviewed underlines that the “importance of ISI and Google Scholar indicators is overestimated” and the absence of “any evidence that these indicators have become any more relevant in decision-making situations such as third-party funding decisions or job recruitments” (Angermüller, this volume).

The emphasis on research relevance and impact is in itself evaluated as a good thing by some academics. They claim, though, that the quality of research is endangered if it becomes a profit-steered business or if it has to produce “value for money”. According to one of the academics “research needs open exchange and free circulation of ideas. Research needs an academic commons. You can’t produce scientific ideas without exposing them to the critical attention of the whole community. Yet if research is subjected to the logic of a private business, it will cease to be scientific” (Angermüller, this volume). Furthermore, this logic of relevance is producing a “sense of instrumentalism” in research and a “sense of timidity” “where you go only for certain kind of projects.” (Richardson, this volume). One can even say that “today, the scientific community has no illusions in this respect: those who vindicate research freedom concerning the subject, the question, the language or the theoretical and methodological paradigms of the research will not be funded” (Martins, this volume). In some cases, people feel constrained to develop “ideas that seem to appeal not just to people working in humanities, but somehow have that crossover with the so-called hard sciences because it seems that at the moment they are the only ones that are being funded” (Macedo, this volume). Adding to this, the relevance requirement can be prohibitive for types of research “that only speak to academic interests” or “more exploratory research, and fields which “cannot be immediately sold as relevant – for example in humanities and social sciences – that are being viewed as obsolete or basically unnecessary” (Krzyżanowski, this volume). In this context, asks one of the academics, how can “irrelevant research in philosophy or ontology, for instance, expect to be funded”, how “can researchers from these research fields compete for funding with “evidence-based” projects?” (Magalhães, this volume).

The current research funding regimes, with their stress on useful knowledge, its economic and commercial utility, and the increasing dependence of knowledge producers

on external financial sponsorship, are thus seen as making competition harder for the “soft” sciences. Within these sciences there are “many research areas of primary importance to society and individuals” (Krzyżanowski, this volume). As one academic notes, “it is not that simple as it seems to some people who say “this is useful, that is not useful”” (idem). These positions lead us to an argument used by Välimaa (2009: 15): “universities are really useful and active members of knowledge societies if they develop theoretical understandings on the changing world because there are no other societal institutions which have the luxury of reflecting on the world from nonutilitarian perspectives. In this regard, critical thinking and theorizing is the most useful activity in globalised knowledge societies”. In the words of one of the interviewees, “there is a problem of finding the right balance” (Krzyżanowski, this volume) and one should be aware that initiatives that are intended to enhance the hugely disregarded yet foundational research in humanities and social sciences, as is the case of those promoted by national councils, for example, may end up self-reproducing a sort of a “national research culture” (idem).

The last topic of the discussion is related with resistance to the discourse of crisis and with alternative futures for forms of governance of education and research. Regarding the first question, resistance, several academics emphasized its non-existence, or its insignificance inside universities: “there’s a lot of talk, and discomfort (...) in staff rooms but it’s not translating to action” (Richardson, this volume); “people are very concerned with their own problems” – cuts in salaries, cuts in jobs (Marín-Arrese, this volume); “very few articles have been written about it from a discourse analytical point of view” (van Dijk, this volume). The current political and economic climate may actually be leading scholars to paralysis: “we go in (...) circles, saying that we do not do [something] because of the crisis (...) it’s like a constant censorship that’s limiting us, limiting our constructing whatever needs to be done in educational terms, research, [etc.]” (Macedo, this volume). One of our interviewees suggests that we should look at culture to find models of resistance: “music, theatre, literature (...) are very important strongholds for the creation of discourses of resistance against the crisis”. Artists can be inspiring as they engage in a work that is “disquieting” and that poses challenges to the current common sense (idem).

As for future alternative ways of governance, some academics note that one should not idealize past forms of regulation and organization of research and higher education as “the “ivory tower” never existed” and “collegial governance (...) was far from being democratic” (Magalhães, this volume). They appeal for a better balance between academic self-governance and accountability, for high levels of self- reflexivity, honesty and flexibility among scholars vis-à-vis teaching, students and society, and for the advancement of “discourses and practices that promote what is “higher” in higher education” (idem). For Martins (this volume) it is vital to combat melancholy – that aesthetic mermaid whose desires are fulfilled with operative mobilisation, with no thought nor social or political engagement – with the ethic criterion of critical unrest (...) Universities should be seen as places of unbounded freedom, as places of a democracy to come. Above all, universities embody a principle of critical resistance and a potential for dissidence, guided by what Jacques Derrida called “a thinking of justice (...). It is their ultimate job to safeguard the

possibilities of the adventure of thought, and to transform both teaching and research into an idea without which the present is a pure form from which all potential has disappeared”.

We finish this introduction with Ruth Levitas (2011) underlying that alternative discourses of possible futures demand a holistic thinking, an imaginary reconstitution of societies within which the future of education is embedded and within which we imagine ourselves otherwise. This kind of thinking allows us to judge what we are doing in light of what we should be doing and in light of who we might become. We have shown, hopefully, that there is no consensus among academics on many such matters. The university will cease to exist if it is not able to accept and to cultivate these differences. However, this should not preclude us from engaging in inclusive debates about our practices, values and identities, and from initiating meaningful struggles for what we imagine to be best.

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