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Interview with John Richardson



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Anabela Carvalho is Associate Professor at the Communication Sciences Department and a member of the *Communication and Society Research Centre* (CECS), University of Minho, Portugal.

Anabela Carvalho – How has the notion of crisis entered discourses about higher education and research? And to what extent do you view this notion of crisis as an excuse for new definitions of the situation in higher education and in research, and as a justification for whatever changes are being implemented in those fields?

John Richardson – The crisis in general, not just in education but in all areas of state spending with the exception of the police (or even with the police to an extent), is being used to roll back and to reduce the role of the state, particularly the expenditure of the state on public services. This is especially strongly felt in education, particularly higher education, because the private universities in the UK are all state-funded. They operate as companies largely. In terms of their income and expenditure, they expect to operate as profit centres but still are state-funded. So they operate under 100% state-funding, whether through central state funding or funding through research, and the crisis is being used to withdraw this, essentially. Before this year, students paid three thousand pounds a year in tuition fees but from September this year it's going to increase to nine thousand, and this is accompanied by a total reduction in central state funding. So the expectation is now that all degree programmes will be funded, in the case of humanities and social sciences, 100% on student tuition fees. It's the only place that they are getting money from.

The odd thing is that the students don't pay their tuition fees up front. They can do if they want to, so this benefits rich parents because you can give the university a cheque for nine thousand pounds. Otherwise you end your university education with twenty seven thousand pounds of debt, which you take out as a loan and then you repay that in the course of the next twenty years. It's essentially your first mortgage, whether you like it or not. Because this is accompanied by a reduction in quotas (most university degrees were quoted until now – a maximum forty, fifty students a year) there can be an increase in number of students and actually an increase in the amount of state funding, paradoxically, until all these students' loan situation work through the system and students actually stop paying it in the form of interest or anything else.

So it's peculiar. The ostensible reason for doing this is to save money. "Because of the crisis", "this is the only way", "we need to reduce government funding". What this is actually doing is increasing government funding while introducing a fully marketized system to higher education and secondly, settling students with debt. And they must know this. They must know the outcome of this. They must have done their sums. So it seems to be an almost entirely ideological agenda to kind of settle people with huge personal debt. I can't think of any other reason why they would do it. What it means of course is that some universities will go bankrupt because they won't be able to attract sufficient students, some degree programmes will be shut down.

Is there political opposition to this?

The problem is that the official opposition, the Labour Party, opposed the increasing fees; but they would oppose anything that the government does, that's what the opposition does even if they actually believe in it... It's just the game of politics. And any opposition that they have or had is ineffective rhetorically because of course they introduced fee themselves. They didn't actually have a workable argument to argue against the increasing fees. Given this general widespread acceptance of the crisis and that cuts must be made, they didn't have an ethical position to oppose fees and they didn't have a pragmatic reason to oppose it either. So it just went through.

At some point there was lots of student protest. How is that now?

It's gone. Effectively it was only in existence as a mass movement for about a period of six to eight weeks, immediately preceding Christmas in 2010. Essentially, when it was being debated in Parliament, there was still a possibility that the Liberal Democrat MPs, who had a manifesto pledge not to increase fees, it was them who were enabling the Tory party to push it through... So there was still a possibility that through lobbying, through pressure, through direct action, you would be able to convince the Lib Dems to stand on principle and not allow that to go through. Since then there have been a few marches, and there is a widespread sense of disquiet amongst young people, but it's sporadic. There would be a march or there would be a single event but there's no sense of extended periods of opposition, and it's only through extended periods of opposition that you are actually going to achieve anything. If it's a march or a single direct action you put police on the streets and it's neutralized to a large extent then everyone goes home.

What impact does this have on the way universities are run? We have heard of enforced changes and reorganization of departments for quite a while. There were some iconic departments in British universities that were shut. How much have the social sciences and humanities been affected?

It's hard to say. That's part of the general marketization of the higher education that you're seeing increasingly in the recent years. It's hard to say; it's like looking to a crystal ball, what's going to happen comes September. Some departments are reporting decreases in student applications, everywhere there's massive decreases in the numbers of mature students, because why on earth you go back to university as a mature student and settle yourself with that much debt? So that's almost entirely gone now, this notion of lifelong learning is completely gone.

Which is ironic, because there is all this European Union discourse promoting lifelong learning. It's a significant thing on their agenda.

Yes, there's still lip service paid to it in Britain but the basic economic facts are such that it just doesn't exist anymore. There may be some comparable uptake in the modularized degrees that are offered by the Open University perhaps, but even the Open University will be charging about nine thousand pounds equivalent for a year degree. I know someone who's doing some modules this year, and if he were to do it next year it would be almost four times as much: the difference between three-four hundred pounds for a module and one thousand pounds. It's just a completely insane increase.

So there is a complete drop in some types of students, often interested students. They will be closing degree programmes, particularly degree programmes that don't have a direct vocational career trajectory. There's direct pressures on courses like media studies to become more vocational, so the critical reflexive approaches of cultural studies, are being sidelined with a preferred emphasis on the kind of modules evolving picking up cameras and training you to do the real directly vocational transferable skills. And there will be universities closures. I think that everyone agrees that some universities will go bankrupt and will close;

it's just unclear which ones that will occur to. It's hard to speak of the university sector as a whole because it's so hierarchical in Britain. There are of course certain universities that this would barely touch: Oxford, Cambridge, Durham, Bristol.

Those universities have had a large chunk of private funding for a long time anyway.

They get that, yes, for buildings or endowed professorships. So that strata will not be affected. Below that there's another strata that are allied to a group of universities called the Russell Group; it's about twenty two universities who are research intensive, again these universities won't be affected. It's the universities that used to be polytechnics, so the post-1992 universities and universities that lean much more heavily on teaching rather than research that tend to recruit working class students and particularly local students. Northumbria University is a very good, a very successful post-92 university, but still they recruit predominantly from local students, it's students from the surrounding area that will go there. It's universities like that predominantly with poorer students, working class students, that will go bankrupt. Some will for sure. It's just unclear which ones will go.

Many of those students are not likely to have an alternative; they won't be able to afford going to universities elsewhere.

Either they will be priced out of the degree full stop or they will be priced out because of the extra costs of living away from home or commuting, etc.

Are tuition fees universal or are they based on income?

It was meant to be based on income. But it's not clear exactly how it is going to work really. There will be some students that won't pay fees, and apparently there will be some form of single payment bursary, but it is all so wooly, it's all so vague, that I'm not sure if it has even been decided how many students, what level ... Because it's not a matter of policy, it's not a matter of legislation. They have to do something, but I don't think it's clear what is the minimum that they have to do, what they have to offer, it's on an ad hoc university basis, what a particular university wants to do, and the extent they want to offset departments that support other departments or offset students for students.

What impact do all these changes have on research? Do you feel that there is a push towards certain areas of research that may be linked to the kind of transferable skills that you were talking about?

The strange thing is that in addition to this marketized system that they are introducing, there is also still the remnant of the last system where every four to five years every department gets audited for their research outputs. Previously what this meant is that you get graded five, four, three and this relates to a certain amount of money. "Five" departments get awarded a certain amount of money, and so on. The feeling is that this will still happen, but only departments that are five or four will actually get anything at all and everyone else will get nothing. And as part of this research reassessment, one thing that you are meant to do is that your research needs to have an impact, in other words it needs to reach out beyond academia and have direct impact.

How is that impact measured?

It isn't, really. You have to make a rhetorical case. In what they meant by impact, they referred to two aspects: scale of impact and longitude, the duration of the impact. Of course for certain departments, like medicine, where a professor discovered a certain kind of drug, this is easy to demonstrate, but in humanities or classics, how do you make such a case? It becomes extraordinary difficult, particularly given that this was something that was only introduced three-four years ago, and given the duration that it usually takes to finish a research project and publish, many departments won't have the ability to actually make a case for the impact of their research. This means of course that they are not going to get the ratings; it means they not going to get any form of research funding; it means they're are even more liable for closure.

What about the different funding councils in the UK? How has the money been adjusted in this situation of 'crisis' between different areas?

First of all there's far less. Of course these funding councils have preferred research areas and one which produced a quite negative reaction about a year ago was when the ESRC introduced research funding for the Big Society. The Big Society is this empty idea of Cameron's to essentially get people to do work for nothing. It's kind of sense of "noblesse oblige". You do voluntary work instead of being paid to do a job that needs to be done. And this was introduced as a research theme for the AHRC. Essentially it's a speculative "find out what on earth this could mean"! So it wasn't "go and interview people and see what people's understanding of it were", it was almost using academics through a back door to formulate policy, to formulate suggestions of policy and how they could come up with better ways to communicate and firm up and make concrete this notion of the Big Society. So this is another way in which it is affected as well.

You also see that there's been an increase in the funding of studies of terrorism, how can we protect ourselves against Muslims. But that's a hangover from the Labour government, it has existed since 2005; so that's less about the economic crisis and more about a cultural crisis, those kind of racist ideas that prevail in British society unfortunately.

So would you say that policies in other areas tend to impact on research policies? In terms of funding, for instance.

They can do, certainly, and it tends to be at the level of the research councils that you see that. In the calls they usually have three kinds of preferred themes and a certain amount of money directly allocated to those themes. Of course they allow for other applications as well, but they are less likely to be approved.

How is that felt at the departmental level? Is there any form of pressure or suggestions to go into those themes or not?

I think again that it is difficult to speak in generalities, because those things affect different departments in different universities differently. Certainly in the university that I am at the minute, the faculty have identified that the section which I work in has a lower proportion of research applications than other areas in the faculty both numerically and

proportionally and therefore it has required us to identify from the people teaching in my department – there's ten of us – two people to commit to submit a large research application in the next academic year. It's certainly one thing that our department is doing that is new. It doesn't specifically say that they need to apply to these specific preferred topics of the research councils, but there's now a specific demand, built into your annual review, to do these applications. I imagine that in certain departments and certain universities there will be an even bigger pressure than that, because faculties are extremely worried about the drop in revenue, which will be caused by the drop in student numbers. So that money needs to be made somehow.

I was talking to someone from a British university yesterday, from an English language department, and he said that he still writes his papers on his own, without funding and large collaborations.

That's like me. I do that as well really. I don't apply for funding generally speaking. But this is an old way of doing things now. I don't think we are going to be allowed to do this for very much longer.

How much do you think that is going to change research practice? Are you going to have the same freedom?

You won't have freedom in terms of the amount of time you have to dedicate yourself to idiosyncratic topics. They will need to have impact or, at the very least, a pathway of impact, the potentiality for impact, which will need to be built into the work that you are planning, whether that's a funded project or a non-funded project, because there's an expectation that's now part of the air we breathe. Even if certain things are accounted should Labour get back in, I would be amazed if this notion of impact goes away. For some reason there's been a wide acceptance this is what we should be doing, maybe it is playing to the academic sense of ego: everyone wants to be a public intellectual. So people now just accept this as written that our work should be read by, and understood by and enjoyed by people outside of academia. And as a generalized principle, that's fine. But there also ought to be other types of research that only speak to academic interests or more exploratory research where you are not sure if what you are ever going to find anything. So first of all it is producing a sense of instrumentalism in research and secondly a sense of timidity where you go for certain types of projects. There's a widespread sense that you need to get publications out of something, you need to be able to produce. Those publications need to have appeal, so it structures the topics that you think about researching for many people. For those that it is not affecting yet, I think there's a sense that it will affect people in the future because otherwise you rely in the other members of your team for doing that, and that seems kind of unfair.

Can you explain what impact means exactly? Is it about dissemination of research?

It can be. For instance you can say as part of a research application that you will host a public event and you invite Unions, charities and Third Sector Organizations. That's your

pathway to impact. You can't guarantee they're going to turn up. It's only if they turn up and then you record it and do something with that. That's starting off impact. Then you need to demonstrate that you didn't just meet people and talked to them in a nice way, that it then affected the way in which they work. The only thing that I really have is my work on islamophobia, which is discussed still by bloggers, for example. It has for what I can gather made its way into certain policy documents and recommendations of the FRA, and the UMC before that, and we worked with the Commission for Racial Equality as well (that's not called that anymore). So you can see that your research is then used in some way by a public body in formulating policy.

But so many of these are spontaneous occurrences. It doesn't necessarily make sense to plan it or to programme research impact.

Of course you need a crystal ball to do be able to do this. It's impossible to predict other than through choosing really populist or explosive topics.

Because it's still working through it's hard to know the effect that it is actually going to have on research practice.

I would like to ask you about the impact of other countries on research policies. For us this is a big thing. Portugal's research policies are very much shaped by the European Commission and by some countries seen as key, like Germany. Do you feel that in Britain?

No. There's a sense that getting European funding through FP7 is a good thing, because it's prestigious and it's a lot of money. In a way I may be atypical because I never held a large research grant and I never really applied for very many of them, I have never really gone for that kind of money. So that kind of sense of whose agendas are being shaped at European level... Maybe some people are more aware of that than me. I haven't felt it in my work other than through the idea that those kinds of funds are prestigious funds.

What about the journals in which you published, are there any pressures towards certain more prestigious journals? We keep being told that we have to publish in ISI journals or at least journals with some other impact factor.

The great advantage for me is the accident of birth, that I'm British, and I speak and write in English. So I don't feel the same pressures that anybody born and living in other countries feels. Generally speaking those high impact journals are English language journals.

But still there are lots of journals in English that are not ISI journals...

In terms of this it's actually contradictory. They changed their mind. This revolves around the research evaluation and they started out by saying that as a measure of quality they will take into account the publication in which something appears. Since then they backtracked on that and said they will just look at the quality of the publication irrespective of where it appears. But most people don't believe this. They are meant to read everything but they don't. In the last assessment, I submitted a book and it came back with copious underlining and highlighting but they stopped halfway through the book, so they just read

half of the book, which is the introductory stuff, and not the actual application, where there is the actual contribution of the book. So given that, I found it dubious that they would read everything. To gauge the quality they will be looking at where something is published.

Are there any examples of resistance to the crisis discourse and alternative forms of governance of education and research being imagined?

No, not really. As I said before the students did revolt momentarily. That was actually really cool. They occupied areas of Newcastle University where I work, whole areas and there were hundreds of students who did it. For a while the staff took them food and drink, until we were threatened that we were not allowed to do that anymore. Unfortunately support should have been forthcoming from the Unions but our Unions are so bourgeois that they only ever strike for pay rises. They never strike, they never even offer the chance to strike in the form of a ballot, when the institution itself, when the ethos of higher education is attacked. It's only when we don't get the 2% pay rises, they only offer 1,5% pay rise, and everyone is up in arms and then there's a strike ballot. It's extraordinary and really very disappointing. The reason for this is that there will be certain universities who benefit from this. There will be universities who because of the crisis will be richer and more powerful and their position within the elite will be more secure. So because of this, there's not a sense of solidarity with academics working in the less prestigious universities, it seems to me. There's a lot of talk, and there's a lot of discomfort, and there's a lot of unease and arguments in staff rooms but it's not translating to action as I see it. We just hope that Labour comes back in, that's the way it works in Britain.

We keep hearing of academics that are moving to China or India from Britain.

Yes, this will happen. For example, I'm going to work in Loughborough from September and in Loughborough there are academics who by birth and by education and training are German, Swedish, Chilean, American and it may be that they go back, I don't know. But certainly talking to academics from outside Britain with children you hear them saying "we will teach our child German rather than English". There's a sense of a shift away of Britain as a center, a powerhouse of higher education. Why would you want to send your child there, why would you want to educate yourself there, why would you want to work there, because of the way the whole system is being destabilized and marketized to the extent that it is.

Huge transformations...

Potentially so, yes.

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