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“Life is a struggle and we have to keep on fighting”:
first generation students in Portugal
in the age of economic crisis

This paper aims to provide a critical account of the impact of the economic crisis on the public higher education sector in Portugal by analyzing the biographical case of one particular first generation student, whose narrative mirrors the precarious and unstable condition of Portuguese students.

It argues that the current state redistribution policies are based on a negative recognition of those in need, and that over emphasizing the cost-sharing role of families in the support of first generation students further accentuates their disadvantaged social position when compared to their peers. Finally, it concludes that the resilience of certain students in this system is possible due to intervention of private networks of care.

Keywords: crisis, higher education, first generation students, biographical research

Introduction

The global economic crisis began in 2008 in the USA, and its effects rapidly spread into Europe, severely affecting Southern European countries, namely those object of an International Monetary Fund intervention. Unlike other crises resulting from public deficits and inefficiency, the current crisis is instead caused by the unregulated operation of the markets (Varghese, 2012). While the Greek case has had wide visibility in international arenas, Portugal (thrown into crisis in 2010 when a rating agency downgraded its rating) has quietly adjusted to the role of the good student, applying austerity measures that severely shake its already fragile welfare state and increase poverty.

According to Pechar&Andres (2011), the expansion of educational systems was only possible due to the growth of welfare states. As Santos (1998) observes, the Portuguese welfare state can be considered a quasi welfare state that does not fit in the categories enounced by Esping-Andersen (1990), presenting characteristics of all three models of capitalism, such as an emphasis on family as the major source of individual support present in conservative states, almost universal healthcare present in social democratic states, and insufficient minimal welfare for the disadvantaged present in liberal regimes. The lack of autonomous organizational and negotiation capacity and segmentation of the social actors, the corruption associated with the discrepancy between the written law and its practice, itself associated with the government perception of social expenses and services as a favor rather than a right-based claim all result in welfare inefficiency (Santos, 1998). Here I argue that the financial crisis and consequent cuts and reforms to the already fragile Portuguese welfare state have devolved its original role providing material protection for students to families, furthering inequalities of access and participation in higher education that were already present due to the diversity of students' socioeconomic background achieved with the massification of the system in the mid 90's (Neave&Amaral, 2011). Particularly, the increase of fees and reforms in needs grant support can lead to a situation similar to that occurring in the UK, where a 1,000 British Pound increase in tuition fees reduces university participation by 3.9 percentage points, while a 1,000 British Pound increase in maintenance grants increases participation by 2.6 percentage points (Dearden, Fitzsimons&Wyness, 2011). The article is based on an undergoing research project that focuses first generation students' experience using biographical methods. It first presents a brief contextualization of the recent changes in funding and social support in the Portuguese tertiary sector, followed by a the-

oretical section introducing the contributions of Fraser, Sen and Fineman. Finally, it presents a single case study that illustrates both the strength of the theoretical framework and applies it to the Portuguese setting.

The Portuguese economic and social context

Portugal is undergoing great challenges posed by an economic and political crisis that resulted in the recent “troika” (the IMF, EU and Central European Bank) intervention that accelerated the growth of inequality and unemployment, as it did previously in other countries (Graeber, 2011). Figures point towards one of the greatest Gini coefficients in Europe (34,2 points) and the current unemployment rate is at a record 17,5%, with 38.2 % youth unemployment (Eurostat, 2013). Emigration numbers have risen 85% in 2011 if compared to the previous year (Instituto Nacional de Estatística, 2012a), testifying that many followed the Prime Ministers advice to leave¹. Against this background of unequal distribution and lack of job perspectives, the Portuguese education system recently implemented major changes aimed at enhancing equality of opportunity, raising attainment levels and widening the basis of recruitment for higher education. The Bologna restructuring was concluded in 2010, however the social aims of the reform have not yet been achieved since socio-economic factors still effect completion figures. Like many other systems in Europe, the Portuguese system focuses on equality of opportunity rather than equality of outcomes, showing that meritocracy rewards achievement rather than effort (Sandel, 2010). Despite the recent figures regarding the probability of a low-schooled background student attending higher education in Portugal being at 54%, the highest in the EU (Conselho Nacional de Educação, 2013; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2012), attainment for those whose parents have low educational background is still below the EU average; only 15.4% of individuals aged between 30-35 have a higher education degree against the 22.9, % EU average (Eurostudent, 2009). When it comes to labour market integration, social inequalities are visible in earnings: the difference of salaries between one male individual whose parent has a higher education degree and one whose parent has lower secondary education is 66,9%, the highest among OECD countries, quite revealing

1 On 18 December 2011, the current Prime Minister suggested that unemployed teachers should look for jobs outside the country (“Passos Coelho aconselha professores a emigrarem para países lusófonos - Educação - Notícias - RTP,” 2011).

of the social immobility of Portuguese society (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2010). As wage premiums are strongly connected with individual educational achievement, this study also verified the persistency of educational qualification among generations. In this respect, the persistence rate in tertiary education is 37,1% for a male individual, and 52,4% for the females in Portugal, even though in all OECD countries the student's whose parents have higher education have a better chance of also achieving a higher education degree². Despite the current discourse around the value of higher education being undermined due to the saturation of credentials, the latest figures show that private returns from higher education degrees are among the highest in Portugal (about \$400,000 for males, supplanted only by private returns in the USA), even considering the substantial gender gap (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2012). This can be explained by the structural under-qualification of the Portuguese population, attested by the Census 2011 (Instituto Nacional de Estatística, 2011), that shows that only 12% of the population have completed an higher education degree and that 44% of the population has at most 4 years of education. These figures raise the value of the diploma on the Portuguese labor market, offering its owners a relatively stronger protection from unemployment and increases the chances for better salaries.

The financial crisis and the funding of higher education

In the context of the financial crisis, the Portuguese higher education system has suffered several changes since 2010. From an historical perspective, fees were introduced in 1992 (Cerdeira, Cabrito&Patrocínio, 2013) testifying the presence of neoliberal policies in higher education that the implementation of the Bologna process would later consolidate (Neave&Amaral, 2011) with the 2007 General Law of higher education. According to the authors, it was fundamentally the advent of European convergence policies (namely the Bologna Process) that precipitated the shift from a university for citizens to a university for clients, dismantling

2 Persistence in tertiary education is measured as the distance between the estimated probability to achieve tertiary education of an individual whose father had also achieved tertiary education and the probability to achieve tertiary education of an individual whose father had below upper secondary education. A larger number implies a larger gap, thus stronger persistence in tertiary education or a lower degree of educational mobility across generations (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2010, p. 12).

institutional collegial structures of governance and autonomy under the leitmotiv of the “negative exceptionality” of the Portuguese system, which supposedly led it to fall behind its European peers in the adaptation of international trends and was responsible for the apparent inefficiency of funding management.

Following (Amaral&Magalhães, 2009) theorization regarding access and participation policies, Portugal underwent three different moments. The first moment, designated as “more is better”, comprises the 23 years between 1974 and 1997, generally characterized by policies that aimed at enlarging access and expanding the system, with the creation of a polytechnic sector and the implementation of a private higher education system that had the function of offering an alternative to those left out of the public sector by the *numerus clausus* policy suggested by the World Bank due to the country’s economic limitations. This, combined with facilitated entry requirements, led to an enrollment increase of 178% (334,125 registrations) in 1996/1997, if compared to 1981. This prosperous period was followed by a decade designated as “more is a problem”, between 1996 to 2004, where the explosive growth of the system, that in 1997 counted 40% enrollment in 20-24 year-olds (approximating the mass higher education system), brought concerns about quality of courses (particularly those of private institutions), thus controlling the enrollments through accountability and accreditation became a priority. Such policies, combined with a declining birth rate, resulted in a downturn of enrollments, first felt in the private sector (while the public sector, particularly the polytechnic system, was still expanding) and later in the public sector. Finally, from 2006 on, the Socialist government responded to the period designated as “more is different”, where the focus is equity of the student body, since, according a 2005 Eurostudent survey, the Portuguese system had the highest rate of students in EU coming from higher schooling background and underrepresented the lower schooled family backgrounds (Tavares, Tavares, Justino&Amaral, 2008). Efforts made in this area through second chance programs and the diversification of entry routes bared fruits (mainly to the entry of mature students), with recent results attesting the balanced and diverse composition of the Portuguese higher education system, where 45% of the student body comes from a low educated family (Orr, Gwosc&Netz, 2011). Unfortunately, due to the economic crisis and the political changes that led to the election of the current parliamentary majority in 2011 (a rightwing coalition between the Social Democrat Party and the Popular Party), the efforts that were previously made may be about to fail. Financial cuts to higher education institutions in 2011 and 2012 cut funding by 20% of funding

(Varghese, 2012), leading to rising fees because universities now depend more on the students' payments to survive. Furthermore, the investment in education was 3,8% of the GDP in 2011 (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2012), a level below that of 1995 (4,9% of the GDP) and far from the OECD average of 6,2%. Finally, regarding social support scholarships, there have been cuts both in tax relief linked to participation in education and in study grants (European Commission, EACEA&Eurydice, 2013). Since such developments are very recent, I will briefly provide an overview of the current state of affairs regarding fees and social support, mostly based on newspapers and statistical data available online as research literature requires more time to produce sound data from this period.

Fees and social support

Until 2010, fees for students in public higher education were 1,000 Euros per year for an undergraduate course (*Licenciatura*), about 1,250 Euros per year for a Master degree, and around 3,000 Euros per year of enrolment for a PhD course (Fonseca, 2011). In 2012, the fees for a *Licenciatura* degree were raised to 1,037 euros.³ Although this amount may not seem high, when considering that the minimum wage in 2012 was 485 euro and that the average net salary was 805 Euros (Instituto Nacional de Estatística, 2012b), the weight of such fees gains other expression. In 2012, Portugal was already among the top 10 European countries with the highest fees, but if one considers that most of these countries do not charge fees to all their students, then Portugal is among the top 3, following UK and Liechtenstein (European Commission, EACEA&Eurydice, 2012). Also, according to the same study, 26% of students in Portugal receive social support that ranges between 987 and 6,018 Euros per year, but the average amount of this support only covers 25% of the student's costs that total 6,624 Euros per year (Cerdeira, Cabrito, Patrocínio, Brites&Machado, 2012). A loan system was established in 2007, with low spreads (1%) and state sponsorship. Despite the limit of 5,000 Euros per

3 Fees were introduced in 1940's with a symbolic value of 1,200 Escudos (6,5 Euros). They were raised in 1993/1994 to a maximum of 399 €, in 1994/95 to a maximum of 419 €, and in 1995/1996 to 439 €. In 2003 the value of fees was established in a minimum of 1,3 the national minimum wage and a maximum amount that shouldn't exceed 1000 euros, approximately (Cerdeira, Cabrito&Patrocínio, 2013).

year, the loan system became so popular that some banks ran out of plafond for such loans in May 2012 (Expresso, 2012). Students who come from lower socio-economic background and who are older are more likely to take a loan (Cerdeira et al., 2012) and most students only recur to them as an alternative or complement to social scholarships (Firmino da Costa, Caetano, Martins&Mauritti, 2009). Since the loan system only began in 2007, there is no available data on student debt, as the first repayments should have started in 2012. However, the current youth unemployment rate forecasts difficult repayment of such loans (Público, 2012c). Regarding delayed fees, in 2012 about 5% of all students had not paid tuition, and in 2013 there are reports from several universities on thousands of students with fee debts, though institutions have different regulations and procedures for dealing with such situation (Jornal de Notícias, 2013).

Finally, regarding social support scholarships, the instability in the eligibility rules for such support have left many students outside higher education, as I shall further report. First, it is necessary to clarify that the Portuguese support system is a family based one rather than being universal; that is, families are expected to cover student's living costs and thus needs grants are not dependent on students' own circumstances (Ward, Ozedmir, Gáti&Medgyesi, 2012). In 2010, the state established that scholarships would be granted according to a formula and not to a progressive bracket system (Ministry of Science, Technology and Higher Education, 2010). This measure, while apparently more just (since the amount of the scholarship would be calculated specifically for each family and would not favor or hinder those families on the extremes ends of the distribution scale), was accompanied by the increase of the number of ECTS⁴ necessary to be eligible from 40% to 50%, which made many students ineligible for support⁵. In 2011, a new scholarship regime established that students whose parents have debts either to social security or to taxes are not entitled to scholarships (Ministry of Education and Science, 2011). This policy of "blaming the victim" was extremely harsh for those students who are in worst economic situations, who end up paying for their families' mistakes. Along with these changes, other rent sources such as bank deposits begun to be considered in

4 European Credit Transfer System, standard for comparing the study attainment and performance of students of higher education across the European Higher Education Area.

5 19% of the applications were overruled because of insufficient academic achievement (Jornal I, 2011).

the overall familiar income and there was a new increase of the minimum number of credits the student must fulfill from 50% to 60% ECTS. The press counted more than 40,000 students being denied scholarship (45% of the applications), with 15% less supported students than in 2010/2011 (Público, 2012a). A national query from several student unions revealed that almost half of the students were experiencing financial difficulties and nearly a third feared having to give up their degree (Público, 2012b). Finally, in 2012, a new law (Ministry of Education and Science, 2012), while aiming to partially correct the unfairness of the previous eligibility rules by allowing the student to reapply to a needs scholarship if a debt payment plan was presented, maintained that household debts can determine the refusal of the scholarship application. Also, the government speeded up the evaluation processes of applications so that students can start receiving scholarships sooner (previously, scholarships could be paid with up to 8 months delay, with the student having no income in the meanwhile).

From the evolution of above described events and following the historical categorization provided by (Amaral&Magalhães, 2009) in the beginning of this section, I believe that Portuguese higher education policies of access are entering a new period, one that could be called “more with less”. Indeed, the particular changes in the funding and social support system, aimed at increasing its sustainability by decreasing the state’s contribution to it, seem to point in the direction of a fierce minimal state characteristic of neoliberal governments. I will further this thesis with the introduction of some theoretical tools that will support the analysis of my empirical data.

Parity of Participation, vulnerability and capabilities:
a threefold framework of analysis

The following section briefly sheds light upon the concepts of parity of participation, vulnerability and capabilities, which compose the theoretical support for the analysis of the single case study presented afterwards. Parity of participation (Fraser&Honneth, 2003) provides a workable definition of justice, while vulnerability (Fineman, 2008) and capabilities (Sen, 1999) focus on more institutional and individual aspects of the parity of participation norm that also privilege a comparative approach.

Nancy Fraser is a feminist philosopher concerned with matters of justice regarding gender and class. Her theory of justice states that the economic and cultural aspects of justice are intertwined and one cannot

replace the other, as the public preference for recognition aspects to the detriment of redistribution seems to suggest. In fact, in developed countries, the expression “social inclusion” has replaced poverty as the key concept in welfare policies, contributing to the invisibility of class and social stratification in public debates.

When mapping injustice in people’s lives, Fraser detects two clusters of problems: problems resulting from misdistribution, that is, from an unfair and uneven distribution of material resources, and problems resulting from misrecognition, that is, from a denial of respect that should be granted to a person or group, a consequence of cultural patterns that are institutionalized and that refuse further questioning. The main concern of justice should then be the eradication economic exploitation and cultural oppression. Whereas both aspects are conceptually separated in order to facilitate analytical exposition and not because of any binary conception of justice (Lovell, 2007), they can overlap and both types of injustice (economic and cultural) can indeed occur at the same time. Specifically, the interpretation of misrecognition as a case of uneven institutional status and not as a case of damaged self-esteem and distorted group identity [as proposed by Honneth (Fraser&Honneth, 2003)] is the key to solve the separation between claims for redistribution (belonging to a moral stance) and the claims for recognition (belonging to an ethical stance). Parting from the deconstruction of the recognition concept, Fraser’s proposal is to extend the notion of justice through the norm of parity of participation, which requires two conditions. First, that the “distribution of material resources must be such as to ensure participants’ independence and voice” (Fraser, 2001, p. 29), that is, that all material inequalities, be they of income or leisure time, are eradicated, in order to permit fair interaction between peers. Second, that “institutionalized patterns of cultural value express equal respect for all participants and ensure equal opportunity for achieving social esteem” (Fraser, 2001, p. 29), that is, that institutions balance their individual perceptions in order to adjust any unjustified differential treatment or any blindness to evident distinctiveness. In Fraser’s most recent version of the parity of participation concept, representation obstacles (social exclusion from networks that are in power to make claims and decisions in public processes of contestation) join redistribution and recognition and form a threefold theory of justice (Fraser, 2007).

Because Fraser’s parity of participation avoids identity essentialization, it is a concept that well serves many contexts and groups, avoiding the trap of labeling and patronizing certain target groups considered “in

need” or “damaged” while also allowing for each to define the way a good life should be lead. The refusal of identity based equity policies is also the concern of Fineman, a feminist legal theorist known for her concept of the vulnerable subject. While vulnerability as a concept has been closely tied to the characterization of subjects socially and economically excluded, Fineman (2008) postulates that vulnerability is inherent to the human condition since people are born and die in dependent of one other, an assumption similar to that found in (Butler 2006), (Arendt 1998) or (Misztal 2011). This dependency is generally placed in the private sphere, in the family realm and considered an initial stage of development of the autonomous rational liberal subject. But while families do provide some shelter for their members, they do not mitigate outside harms to which themselves as a social cluster are constantly exposed to through their lives. Therefore, addressing vulnerability is acknowledging that all of us, particularly in a risk society, can undergo transition periods that require further support and attention from the public sphere and the community. Vulnerability is then not a negative state endorsed to disadvantaged sectors of the population, but a common characteristic of us all, one that can be amplified or reduced by institutional action. According to Fineman (*ibidem*), the success of certain individuals that belong to “disadvantaged groups” can be explained by their access to certain institutional privileges, and it is the intersectionality (of privileges) that justifies their resilience. Therefore, “it is not multiple *identities* that intersect to produce compounded inequalities, as has been posited by some theorists, but rather systems of power and privilege that interact to produce webs of advantages and disadvantages” (Fineman 2008: 16). Fineman’s argument is in line with some of Rawls objections to the meritocratic justice ideal, since it sustains that the success and achievements of some are due to interaction and support both of circumstances and others, and therefore its erroneous that one claims entitlement for her own success (Sandel 2010). She then calls for a responsive state that secures equal protection to all in a post-identity shift that replaces the liberal subject at the basis of current public policy (a subject that is always adult and autonomous) with the vulnerable subject, a transitional and more universal category that allows mobilization beyond group interests against uneven institutional arrangements and unequal distribution of assets. These assets can be material (wealth), human (health and education) or social (networks of relationships).

While it is useful to delimitate vulnerability as an intrinsic human feature, such conceptual framework would not be complete without introducing the capability approach as a positive counterpart of vulne-

rability. The capability approach is a normative framework for evaluating the quality of life developed by (Sen 1999) and further used on the United Nations' Index of Human Development. According to (Sen 1999), capabilities are the set of real opportunities an individual has to choose from in order to achieve a life she has reason to value. Such opportunities are mediated by conversion factors that interfere with the person's ability to function, i.e. to become the person she wishes and act accordingly to such vision. These conversion factors can be personal (mental or physical talent), social (cultural norms and roles) and environmental (institutional infrastructures or climate) (Alkire&Deneulin 2009). Given the heterogeneity of conversion factors among people and their contexts, Sen considers that different individuals will have different needs. The use of capabilities as a metric of human development rather than opportunities is useful in the context of this research for it highlights the fact that inter individual differences and contexts interfere with the translation of a formal opportunity into a reality.

Based on these theoretical contributes I have formulated the following premises:

- Misdistribution of material and social assets is perceived by FGS not only as a matter of curtailed freedom of choice but also as a sign of disrespect.
- Resilience observed in certain individuals is due not to innate personal characteristics but to external support provided by institutional intervention.
- Portuguese policy makers are not assuming their responsibility in protecting the students from the economic crisis, remitting that task to the private sphere (where family or other alternative support networks and institutions assume that role).
- Higher education attendance is negatively affected by social and environmental conversion factors.

These assumptions shall be proven by the exposition of the following case study.

“Life is a struggle and we have to keep on fighting”: Patricia's case

For researching first generation student experience in Portugal, I have conducted 25 problem centered interviews in one public Portuguese higher education institution with individuals selected through snowball sampling. Problem centered interviews is a method that combines both

features of deductive and inductive reasoning (Witzel&Reiter 2012) and that can be understood as a valid method for conducting biographical research (Scheibelhofer 2005). Biographical research is particularly suited to understand issues of individual agency and, moreover as (Bourdieu 1986) notices, holds a double value: the narrative value of the individual story as well as the historical value of testifying a given time period. For this reason, I have selected one single case study of all my data set, one that is particularly rich for both the illustration of the current effects higher education policies have on first generation students lives but also rich for the confirmation of the theoretical premises enounced above. This case then constitutes, in the words of (Flyvbjerg 2006), a critical case, i.e. a case suited to the falsification or verification of hypotheses applicable to the whole data set. Given the particular structure of qualifications of the Portuguese population, I have operationalized first generation students as students whose parents have at most 9 years of education.

Patricia's is 20 years old and is on her 2nd year of Artistic studies. She entered the university in the 2009/2010 academic year. I interviewed her in 2012. Patricia has a sister (still in school) and a brother (who gave up studying in the 9th grade) and they are all from different parents. Because of domestic violence, her mother left her biological father when she was 3 months old. For this reason, she has never met him. Since then, her parental life was juggled between several foster families and caretakers, together with her brothers. One of her brothers due to the negligence of Patricia's mother and an ill foster parent. This led Patricia's mother to be imprisoned for 6 years. Despite the separation, Patricia is still very attached to her mother. After being released, her mother began working as a cleaning lady in a hotel and now studies part-time to obtain a 9th grade diploma (in a "second chance" program).

Up to 9th grade, Patricia was an average student. Everything changed when she received a merit grant from the Ministry of Education on her upper secondary. She was then reassured of her intellectual abilities, although she was very indecisive about going or not going for the university (because she wouldn't be able to afford it) and whether to choose Law or Artistic Studies. She also applied for a military career (for economic security), but lack of Mathematics did not allow her to succeed. The advice of her working class family lead her to pick Law, which revealed to be a disappointment, as she felt an "*annulation of identity*" and resented the favors conceded to her middle class peers, who were better networked within the faculty: "*I started to see that, with the professors, the young ones were sons or relatives of the old ones,*

I started to see that things were facilitated for certain people but not to others". She also had no updated books because the books she had were old and borrowed from an aunt. "I couldn't follow the classes, the pages and content were different, almost every year they launch a new edition (...) It's a lot of money for the professors, maybe that's why they change the books every year, which doesn't allow people to study from other books." At the time, her grandmother fell ill at the hospital and Patricia got the extra responsibility of doing housework and taking care of her younger sister (here, the responsibility for housework that she must bear since she is a woman is clearly visible). Because of this, she had no time to study for exams and dropped out, even though with reported shame. At the time, her mother said that she needed to work, because there was no money to support her. She recalls *"I was very angry at the time because I was a bit depressed and also because she was demanding from me something that was never asked from my brother, who dropped out in 9th grade and is still unemployed today"*. She had to find a precarious job as a shop assistant. In 2009/2010, she was not granted a scholarship, but only received the final response to her application by the end of the academic year, when she was not even attending classes anymore (and here one can see how long can processes for scholarship applications be delayed). Since she had no scholarship, she could not pay her fees, and because of that debt prevented her from applying for another degree. She then went on a struggle with social services, explaining her situation, and after many bureaucratic exchanges, she managed to obtain exception from the fees. She then entered Artistic Studies in 2010/2011, but again she was refused the university social scholarship because of a bureaucratic error (an internet document went missing) and also her mother's debts to social security (despite the legislation that officially penalized debts only being applied later, having debts was already presented as a valid reason for being dismissed from scholarship consideration). She tried to apply for a loan, but again her mother's debts wouldn't allow her to have her as a sponsor. When facing the possibility of Patricia having to drop out again, her mother talked to a church institution that, according to what she read in the newspaper, was helping some students to pay the fees. They agreed to help her because she had good grades and introduced her to another private institution that is now paying her tuition, since a scholarship from the state was denied again in 2011/2012 on the grounds of family debts. The institution also offered Patricia psychological support which she refused because she reasons it is not for her: *"I think that there is the concept of resilience, which is basically you have a lot of*

problems and obstacles and you get over them without breaking down. I think I may have that intrinsically, there is that thing of always fighting for something, always fighting...” Regarding scholarships she reports that she knows a lot of colleagues that have scholarships but do not need them: “*These are situations that make you upset, you see it and you just think: while someone is spending the scholarship money on clothes, another had to quit because she had no money to eat or to study. And that’s it, you become more revolted against the system, against the country, against the university...*” When I asked Patricia about her future, her aspirations were vague, as she is prepared to leave because of the countries’ inexistent job prospects. However, on a shorter term, she expresses the wish of being independent, because as she explains: “*you stop studying because you don’t have any money and you can’t do anything about it, because you don’t invent money, I can’t make my brother go to work, I can’t make my mother find a job just like that, you know, it is not in my hands. What I see many times is that my life is very entwined with theirs, and if their life is stuck, mine consequently gets stuck as well, and that is happening still today, and what can I do, what is my only option? I don’t know, moving out to live alone and try to get rid of all this mess they create voluntarily or involuntarily*”. She has a boyfriend who goes to Medical school and comes from middle class background, his family also acts as a material support for Patricia, helping with schoolbooks for her sister for example. Despite that, both of them consider emigrating, because “*Portugal is a hole of recognition, with illiterate people who don’t know who they vote for. I want to live and to be happy and so staying here is, I don’t know, choosing not to live.*”

While reading through Patricia’s biography, one is confronted with the constant association of misdistribution and misrecognition. For many students, getting a scholarship is a sign of recognition from the state, even more so if it is a merit scholarship, as was her case in upper secondary. The scholarship thus represents not only money and material support but as a symbolic reward for personal effort either academically or socially, since for many of these students, surviving their families requires as much skill and energy as achieving good grades in school. Patricia had an external sign of recognition in her upper secondary, but that was taken away from her at the university, where she felt excluded both materially and socially from the assets that her wealthiest peers had (she had no money to buy books nor inside contacts in the faculty). When she compares herself to others who were granted privileges, her fury is evident as she observes that parity of participation is not granted to those who come from unfavorable backgrounds like hers. On top of

that, because she is a woman, her unstable family life overcharged her with domestic responsibilities and here the social conversion factor of gender furthered her already disadvantaged situation.

The successive scholarship applications and subsequent refusal mirrors the unreliability surrounding the criteria for selecting those who get supported and also the deficient response of public institutions. Furthermore, the fact that the student is held to blame for her family's economic mistakes (and attending a higher education course constitutes itself a risk, because the student incurs debt) transforms the desire of getting a degree into a personal saga of resistance of how to deal with bureaucracy and survive unfair rejections. It is no doubt that Patricia's personal strength and experience in dealing with social services acquired through her difficult life path have helped her to navigate the process of exemption of fees in her first year; but her consequent years would have not been possible without the intervention of a private institution that provided for her and guided her to another private support scheme. Here, it is worth noting that knowledge of such schemes is granted only to insiders, that is, to those who managed to access certain networks and that also her boyfriend acts as a source of material support, showing that, again, private action and not innate personal qualities is the main secret behind those resilient characters who appear to beat all the odds.

The fact that the state's response to the economic crisis seems to be in decreasing economic support implies that the students' survival is mostly reliant on their families' possessions (or lack of them). This further perpetuates a situation of student dependency on their families and denies the student her individuality and autonomy by not distinguishing her from her parents, which, if for some students is a solution, for many first generation students is part of the problem. As Patricia states, the only way to have some stability is to leave home, as if only the separation from her family environment would bring her some peace. By circumscribing the scope of personal agency to the chances of the household, the government is thus denying the promise of social mobility advertised by higher education since only those with material assets can actually succeed in the university, further reaffirming the reproduction of class through this system.

Patricia is well aware of the role the government has on her conditions, and her critical thinking leads her to classify Portugal as a country that does not recognise its own worth, "a hole of recognition". The life she has reason to value must be somewhere else, because as she states, "staying here is choosing not to live". But is emigration a real choice when it is the only one? Here, one can actually confirm Sen's insight on

individual agency being limited by conversion factors, namely social and environmental in this case. Her structural vulnerable situation and the lack of responsiveness by the competent authorities leave Patricia with no options but to leave.

Conclusion

The present case study attempted to illustrate the consequences of the economic crisis in the higher education sector in Portugal, showing that government disinvestment is provoking a sharpening of the socio-economic background differential present in higher education access and participation. It did so by providing an updated description of the recent events on policy making in the country, formulating some theoretical hypothesis and contrasting them against a particular case study. Patricia's particular narrative fitted the purpose of confirming that parity of participation is not yet achieved due to misdistribution errors and that this economical barrier also constitutes a lack of respect for those students more in need. It also clarified in which way state policies are pushing the responsibility of protecting these students to the private sphere and the negative effects such a trend may have in re-establishing the class differences a public education system should aim to erase. Finally, it exemplified how individual agency is circumscribed or nurtured by one's conditions, particularly those that come from institutional sources and how resilience, often seen as an innate gift, is indeed the product of the interference of institutions that provide the individual with material, social and human assets that she relies on to thrive.

Despite the lack of state support, Patricia's story is one of success, confirmed by the resilient label she proudly owns. The meritocratic conception of justice lies on the basis of this label, a concept that sustains that those who work hard should receive the benefits for their effort, thus portraying justice as matter of investment, a human capital affair. It is such narrative that allows the government to claim that the system does work for those who try hard, through a "survival of the fittest" logic, though the deserving of those laurels can be questioned. Patricia's story not only shows that many who deserve are not being supported but also that their resistance does not depend on them alone but mainly on the care others are able to provide. Furthermore, when the future prospects emigration as the only viable option, one can clearly see the lack of capabilities these students are facing. While it can be argued that Patricia's case is peculiar and should not be generalized, many other

interviewees present similar testimonies of material deprivation, parentification and disrespect. If the current economic debt is threatening and demands immediate action, public intervention should aim to protect those more vulnerable and create alternatives to the precarity caused by the financial crisis with policies that aim not at human survival but at human development. Yet, the government seems determined to see how many more can do with less.

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Abstrakt: Niniejszy artykuł jest krytyczną analizą wpływu kryzysu ekonomicznego na publiczny sektor szkolnictwa wyższego w Portugalii i opiera się na biograficznym studium przypadku studentki z pierwszego pokolenia studiujących, której narracja jest odbiciem prekarnych i niestabilnych warunków życia tej grupy. Autorka dowodzi, że obecna polityka redystrybucyjna państwa opiera się na negatywnym naznaczeniu studentów wymagających wsparcia socjalnego, a zbyt silny nacisk na wspierającą rolę rodziny dodatkowo utrwała relatywnie niską pozycję społeczną takich studentek. W końcu, zdolność do funkcjonowania studentów w ramach takiego systemu zależy od wsparcia indywidualnych sieci opieki.

Słowa kluczowe: kryzys, szkolnictwo wyższe, pierwsze pokolenie studentów, badania biograficzne