

Interview with Ana Gabriela Macedo



BY SILVANA MOTA-RIBEIRO

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http://ceh.ilch.uminho.pt/pagina_investigador.php?inv=ana_gabriela_macedo_lit.php

Silvana Mota-Ribeiro is Assistant Professor at the Communication Sciences Department and a member of the *Communication and Society Research Centre* (CECS), University of Minho, Portugal.

Silvana Mota-Ribeiro – How has the notion of crisis entered discourses about higher education and research?

Ana Gabriela Macedo – I think the notion of crisis is transversal at the moment to any kind of discourse. Therefore it goes without saying that it would have to enter discourses in higher education and research. But, on the other hand, I think that crisis is a concept that partakes of any kind of thorough thinking about education and any thorough thinking about research. It's something that we know, we understand, we feel, that the concept has slightly changed to mean something more timely, more political, more ideological in relation to the economic crisis that we are going through. So, for me and for many people, I'm sure, the

concept of crisis is definitely not new. It has not meant something negative as such. But, at the moment, of course we identify it with very, very, concrete issues which have a very economic, or “economicist”, if you like, connotation.

How do you think the notion of crisis has been used to construct problems or offer putative solutions in the discourses of, for instance, politicians, research, institutions, universities and even the European Union, regarding specifically Social Sciences and Humanities.

When you say it has been used, what you mean? How it has been appropriated, is that what you mean?

Yes. How it has been enacted...

I don't think this is very clear because if you separate the concept of crisis from the particular moment we are living through, then, this would have one answer. If, on the other hand, this question is already set in the context of the economic crisis we are going through, then, another answer should come to our minds. Is this what you mean? In the present moment...?

Yes, yes, and, specifically, in Social Sciences and Humanities.

Ok. Then, concretely, what we hear all the time it's like reasons to justify cuts, for example. Reasons to justify the need for restrictions of one kind or another. And, then, the crisis as such is at the background of it all and is so to speak a big umbrella that seems to justify what is not going right. And that's dangerous because you kind of learn the jargon and you start saying: “Well, you know, there's no point in doing this project at the moment because of the crisis. No point in hiring new people, getting new blood for universities or research institutions because there's no money, so there's a crisis”. And this is like a *cul-de-sac*, we go in turns, in kind of circles, saying that we do not do this because of the crisis. So somehow the crisis justifies our not doing things, our not accomplishing our projects. And it's like a constant censorship that's limiting us, limiting our activity, limiting our constructing whatever needs to be done in educational terms, research, projects, etc. etc. So it's very dangerous. So, somehow, I'm very much against it. There's no way we can avoid the fact that Europe is going through very heavy economic, political, financial crisis. That's very true. But we've got to find ways to ... not to avoid it but to resist, to resist this feeling that nothing can be done because of the crisis because this kind of leaves us numb, without any possibility of movement and that's very worrying.

And you think that's a heavier burden for Social Sciences and Humanities?

Yes. When you think about crisis and when you think about what has to be cut or where to start with the cuts history has told us that Humanities and Social Sciences tend to be the first to become redundant somehow. It doesn't have to be so; it doesn't have to be like this. But it's like, “ok, sciences must go on, because it's basic research, biomedicine or medicine, for example, or engineering sciences, that's the pragmatic world, and it has to go, it has to go on”. So, where do we cut? We cut somewhere in culture because it's supposed to be dispensable, or less pragmatic, or less cause-effect, it provides less effects in terms of

providing social changes or providing money and all that. And again it's a very worrying feeling for those of us that work in this field and of course do not believe the least that culture is redundant or less important.

In your opinion, how does this crisis discourse in education and research intertwine with other crisis discourses, for instance, in culture, in finance, in politics?

Again, as I was saying, look at the situation in Portugal. I lived in England throughout the eighties and there were a lot of cuts in education because Margaret Thatcher was prime minister and the first to suffer the heavy cuts were the Departments of Humanities. Many of them disappeared, there were big merges in the Humanities and Social Sciences Departments. And that's very much what's happening now. All over Europe, in fact. I was in France last year giving a talk in a conference and people complained about it there, people are complaining about it in Spain, people are complaining about it in Italy, and we are complaining about it in Portugal. So I don't think this is a local issue, this is definitely an international problem. Culture should have a major role to play. And somehow I think culture is playing a very strong role at the moment in kind of creating instances of resistance. If we go to Teatro São João in Porto, at the moment, what do we see? We see that there's much less money than before, it's very difficult to put out plays, there's not a resident company, for example. There's no money to hire new actors. Productions are difficult to create without money. But, whatever it's been produced still has a very high quality. I'm talking about Porto because we live in the North and it makes sense to talk about the north of Portugal... So I feel and I strongly believe that it's maybe more so in times of crisis and difficulties like the ones we are living through that culture has even more responsibilities to be a kind of stronghold of that discourse of resistance. And we are seeing that. Another example: music. Every day, every morning, we put on the radio in Portugal, at the moment, there's a new group of Portuguese young people that despite all the odds and all the difficulties got together, managed to make their own band and sing. They sing in Portuguese and they sing protest songs. So it's like back to when I was 17, 18, 19, the years of 74 Revolution, and it's back to times when the ballad, or whatever we want to call it, is badly needed, is strongly needed.

So that feeling that nobody is doing anything, everybody is depressed, you know, people are nostalgic about the past... I definitely do not think this is what is happening in a country like Portugal and probably in many other places. We see young people resisting in the ways that they manage, in the ways that they find possible to create discourses of resistance. So they are cultural discourses and they are political discourses, in that case. I strongly believe that music, theatre, literature, whatever... the media, they can be too — but you know I'm not so familiar with that... — are very important strongholds for the creation of discourses of resistance against the crisis, against the nostalgia feeling, which is very dangerous.

The idea that people are doing nothing... But when you think of the role of the state in research and education, it's not easy to imagine it without funding, so it's not that easy to resist. So, how do you think the role of the state in research and education is being changed and revised and with what implications? Because, if in culture we have a certain degree of freedom

and creative potential of artists and cultural entities and agents and actors, when it comes to research it's quite hard to imagine it without funding. So how do you think that this freedom and this creative potential of researchers are being affected in a context where markets seem to rule?

I think that, politically, Europe is going through times of neo-liberalism without any disguise, without any veils. That's what we are seeing all around us, and Portugal is no exception to this. And the political discourse, the cultural discourse, and the financial discourse of neo-liberalism are coherent. Any ideology after all wants to or tends to be coherent. So they want to make us believe that whatever is state-funded should be over because it's like we should feel guilty for being financed or funded by the state. And that's very dangerous, as I said. The nostalgia trip, you know, "oh, let's go back to the old days when people really worked hard and they didn't need the state to give them any support and the self-made man, and this and that". You know, it's the neo-liberal discourse. I personally believe that Portugal really developed a lot, seriously and coherently in the last 40 years or so, which we are almost about to commemorate next year – 40 years after the Carnations' Revolution.

If we can say at the moment that we have 25% of people with diplomas, having gone through university and having a university degree, that's really important and it's wonderful. 40 years ago the figures would be so dramatically different that people should not forget that. Definitely the country has changed and changed in all different sectors, education being, as we all, I think, agree, the most important of them all because it's from this possibility of people acquiring a different level of literacy and being more capable citizens and more in control of their lives that the country has been able to change and to be more competitive also.

So when young people are told "ok, you don't have a job here why don't you go look for a job elsewhere?" it's very serious. It's very important that young Portuguese people can compete with other young people from all over the place, America or England... But this is thanks to a very strong effort to give them the education that they weren't able to get 40 years ago.

In the Social Sciences and Humanities we have a context-specific research. There's the question of Europe, but also which countries in Europe drive research policies, and the Portuguese Science and Technology Foundation cites Germany as a model and claims that the way it can help the Portuguese scientific community being more successful in European calls is by promoting, and I quote, "a greater alignment with European programmes". To what extent do you think that core countries are setting standards and research areas and priorities? And how do you think that might impact on Social Sciences and Humanities, which are obviously context specific? We have another country telling us what to do...

I think that, again, what's happened in the last 15 to 20 years in the fields that both you and myself share, Humanities and Social Sciences, is definitely a dramatic change for the better. I remember that, let's say, 20 years ago, 15 years ago, there was no possibility of talking about projects being financed. It was unheard of. I remember having discussions here in this university when somebody with responsibilities from our Science Foundation came to this university and I asked: "When are you going to be able to apply for a project and get successful? Please, open a possibility... Name us, so that when we see the rules of a

new programme, we see, ok, Humanities are specified there so there's a possibility for us to apply for this scholarship or for this project funding...". So we were not even able to apply because we did not count, we were not there. Things have changed dramatically and now we are there or we were for a number of years. As you know I've been running a research Centre of Humanities for, I think, 12 years now and what I've seen happening is this major change of projects within this particular research centre, which is called Centre for Humanistic Studies. We have five projects running at the moment, for example. Strong projects, international projects, projects in cooperation in fields that vary from literature, storytelling, to linguistics, social linguistic, political philosophy... There's one with biomedicine, discourses and narratives of biomedicine. This was absolutely impossible to happen, let's say, 15 to 20 years ago. Now, what I'm really worried about is that we go back to this zero, this annihilation or this non-existence because in the last call for projects, from the 11 projects that we submitted, none was funded and they were all very highly rated and very well assessed. So, what does this mean? That the cuts for Humanities were so strong that even projects rated as excellent were not funded. That's extremely worrying. How can you resist this? It's really difficult. We have to have a lot of support from each other, we have to have lots of young people, post-docs, new blood, people that are not so exhausted from routines and daily chores and the administration and that really... put a lot of effort and energy and time into creating 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.

Yes, it's worrying. Those rated as excellent are not getting any funding... Strong issues that should be addressed. Right now it seems that there's a widespread institutional pressure towards what is being called "excellence" translated into international research, strong competition and specifically publication in journals with known impact factor. It seems to be reduced to that. In Portugal, for the Social Sciences and Humanities field, this means following core countries, especially Anglo-Saxon ones and also core languages, in this case, basically, English, and also applying for European funding. That's what excellence seems to mean right now. Is this the case in Portugal, in our country? And what do you think the implications of these priorities – strong competition, international research, publication in impact factor journals – can be for the work of researchers and also for the diversity and quality of the research, specifically in Portugal?

I think it's worrying again. On one hand, it's dangerous if we adopt the discourse that denies any kind of competition... We all want to be read widely, we all want to have our publications in the net, we all want to attract consortiums and international visibility. We learnt all that and we know that's important. It's important to be part of international networks. It's also important to be part of international projects, and curiously enough, recently, we heard our rector saying, in the latest evaluation of the Universidade do Minho, that's as a whole, the Universidade do Minho was much more successful in European projects than in nationally funded projects, which is quite curious and awkward, to say the least. This means that the researchers in Portugal know how to build strong projects because they get the funding from European institutions, right? So it means that they have impact in their research... I'm lucky enough to have colleagues from different areas and many friends

working in different fields and so I really believe, on the one hand, it's very important, for example, to have our journals from our research centres – and we have one that is quite well-known in our centre – and to have a virtual platform that 's accessible... This is good. The impact that our papers get when the publications are accessible online is definitely very important. But I have many colleagues that write in Portuguese because their field is Portuguese literature and therefore the Portuguese language is a very important vehicle to express their field of research, and often is the very object of research, when we talk about Portuguese linguistics, for example. So, when we talk about the impact of these journals, of these publications, of course it's a different kind of impact because English as, you know, the academic language, so to speak, but it is not one that can be used always and all the time and by every researcher. So here's an exceptional situation, so to speak, which doesn't mean that the journals where these colleagues are publishing are not as good, but definitely they are not all the time the ones that have the widest impact. So, that's a worrying situation and an issue that we'd like to see discussed more openly.

Then, there's concept of slow science, as well. The concept of slow science is being discussed by many people, by intellectuals in many places of the world and also by very well known and reputed intellectuals in Portugal too. People like Eduardo Lourenço or even António Nova, the rector of Universidade de Lisboa, to name just a few, have named this as an important concept. It's not, again, nostalgia when we talk about slow science. No: it's a different way of operating. Not necessarily a kind of going back to the past. It's calling attention to the need to reflect a bit more when we are wanting to present a paper, then to publish the paper... to have a better way to judge rather than just what's the best journal to publish when you talk about impact. Not just that... what suits me better? What's the best journal for the kind of work that I do without immediately thinking in terms of its impact in comparison to other journals? So, it's really very, very, problematic in our areas to think in those terms. And we cannot apply just one rule, which is the same for every field or area of research, that's for sure.

Let me just add something because I think it's often forgotten. In terms of publications, it should be noted that we, in the Humanities and Social Sciences, value more the publications in books, monographs, rather than in papers, which is exactly the opposite from our colleagues that do exact sciences or hard sciences. A monograph, a book, that we manage to edit, to put together is a tremendous effort, and definitely it's always been considered the best form of achievement for a researcher in our areas. And again that does not compare, by these rules that tell us, you know, "journals with impact"... A book is not a journal for a start and the impact of a book cannot be measured in this sort of way, so here is another important thing...

We have talked about resistance already, but a final question: What examples of resistances to this context, basically of crisis discourses, can you point out? You have already talked about culture. How can alternative forms of governance and education and research be imagined and enacted? You have already mentioned the discussion about slow science... How can we search for alternative forms of running education and research?

The first thing is to be able cope with all this without really feeling totally annihilated and discouraged and depressed. That's pretty difficult at the moment because, you see, we have to apply and apply, and apply yet again for projects to be refused, not to be granted with the money that we asked for, and still we have to do a project again next year. So that's endurance. The word endurance for me is very much related with the word resistance. And endurance has nothing to do with a kind of compliance. No, to endure is to have resilience in order to go through difficult times. To resist and still go on, when so very often you feel like "that's it...that's enough! Let me go to my little ivory tower and write my poems, write my essays on the poems that I like, and give my classes, and enjoy what am I doing", in a very individualistic sort of way. That's what is happening, dangerously enough, to many of us that work in these fields. We have built alliances with people, we have constructed project networks, we have constructed cooperations of different kinds, we have done transdisciplinary work in fields where before it wasn't heard of. The word "transdisciplinarity" was a dirty word. And I believe that we managed to do so and to transform that word into something respectable, so, as I was saying, at the moment, the big slogan, the big motto, is "resilience, endurance and resistance"! For how long are we going to cope, I don't know. I am pretty sure that these times are not going to go away this fast. They came really fast but probably they are going to be a bit longer than we would have liked them to. And we have to find ways to keep struggling and resist and still create, be creative. I find culture, again, a wonderful stronghold, as I said before, in the sense that it's not a niche, it's not a ghetto... let's not understand it like that. I understand it not as a comfort zone; culture is not a comfort zone. Culture should be understood as something that is disquieting, something that is provoking, something that makes you uncomfortable at times, but it's a continuous challenge. So do we have to do? We have to continue producing our challenges, and keep going!

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