

Interview with Michał Krzyżanowski



BY ANA BRANDÃO

Michał Krzyżanowski works at the University of Örebro in Sweden where he came in 2013 after holding posts at the University of Aberdeen (UK), Lancaster University (UK), University of Vienna (Austria) and Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań (Poland). He specialises in Critical Discourse Analysis and has researched extensively on communication in media and the public sphere, communication in national and supranational politics, multilingualism, linguistic and cultural diversity, and racism and social exclusion. He has also worked on developing new discourse-based approaches in qualitative research methodology. Michał is Associate Editor of the *Journal of Language and Politics* and serves on editorial boards of such key journals as, inter alia, *Critical Discourse Studies* or *Qualitative Sociology Review*. He has published widely including in such journals as *Discourse & Society*, *Journalism Studies* or *Critical Discourse Studies*. His recent book publications include, among others, *Ethnography and Critical Discourse Analysis* (2011) and *The Discursive Construction of European Identities* (2010).

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Ana Brandão – How has the notion of crisis entered discourses about higher education and research? How has it been used to construct problems and offer putative solutions in the discourses of politicians, research institutions, universities and the European Union regarding social sciences and the humanities? How does the crisis discourse in education and research intertwine with other crisis discourses (cultural, financial, political)?

Michał Krzyżanowski – I think that the first important issue to mention is that crisis is, in a way, always there. We know from quite a lot of research – like, for example, in conceptual history, etc. – that crisis is always, to some extent, a motor, something which is driving

many changes. The question about the current crisis is something entirely different because what we have presently is basically a large discourse about economic crisis, which is now being recontextualized in different social fields. The way we understood or usually knew crisis historically was very often associated with some sort of negative occurrences, which however in a longer perspective had some sort of positive implications. The current crisis, in a way, is slightly different because it is some sort of a general frame, a general excuse for many actions, which have to change different fields and that includes, of course, education and higher education. The current crisis refers to economic crisis. So, this has entered higher education, as far as I can say from my experience, in countries such as Austria, United Kingdom and Poland. In higher education this has much to do with scarcity of resources that appeared in different countries across Europe and then that scarcity of resources had to be framed and legitimised. It takes very different, nationally dependent forms, so it is really difficult, I think, to talk about crisis generally. But generally we can see that in higher education, or the academia as such, which is now internationalised also in the course of a similar crisis, we are seeing some things which I think that some twenty years ago pointed to the commodification of higher education. We are no longer interested in research and in competing on the basis of research as such but we are much more perceiving, or starting to perceive, higher education institutions as companies or as economic entities, which create certain products which then need to be sold. That, of course, changes very much not only the social perception of higher education, but also higher education on the inside because that means that, for example, our relationship with the students changed because they are no longer students, they are often treated as costumers. And, of course, that also changes our overall attitude towards research because we no longer think about research and advancement of research as such but also about the relevance of that research, for example, to the economic aims, be it nationally or internationally. That, I think, is the major thing, although it must be mentioned that that higher education crisis, if you will, had already started before the current economic crisis. For example, economic literature usually mentions 2007/2008 for the start of the economic crisis in Europe whereas the process of economization and commoditization of education was already well under way by then for nearly a decade. Yet, the commodification of higher education allows now for the crisis-related frames to be used as easily and as widely across Europe. So my question is whether it is not just an excuse which is nowadays lenient to something that people already wanted to do.

You talk about a “general excuse”. Can you elaborate a bit more?

Well, I can elaborate inasmuch as I can say that, in a way, there is a certain change in higher education and in research that has been happening now for quite a while. I think the reason for that is not the crisis as we know it nowadays, but a wider trend towards a general liberal – or neo-liberal – tendency in social, economic, and political life. Higher education did not escape those tendencies and nowadays, in a way, we can only say that that neo-liberal trend speeded up as a legitimisation frame through which the crisis discourse is implemented.

So, you think there is a kind of ideological trend towards neo-liberal thought...

The ideological trend would be good if it was only some sort of ideological way of thinking – ideas or concepts – but here we are dealing with both ideas and actions. And I think our major problem are actions. You notice that a big change is happening across Europe in higher education institutions. The general approach towards what they are, what is their function, what is their social function is actually changing; we might say changing for the worse, unfortunately.

How is the role of the state in research and education being revised and with what implications? How is the scope of freedom and creative potential of researchers being affected in a context where markets seem to rule?

There is a question of whether the increased or decreased presence of the state within higher education is positive or negative. I think that what we have generally witnessed some sort of a gradual withdrawal of the state from higher education, especially in terms of state funding for institutions, and some sort of a drive for the institutions to rely much more on their own resources, to mobilize resources. And that means a very significant change because as much as state funding could have been also a problematic issue in terms of giving particular guidelines to research, to fostering or promoting certain areas of research and so on and so forth, that also meant that, at least, research was being made relevant to the surrounding society. Nowadays, what we have is institutions seeking their own ways of making profits. Making profits was not at all a function of higher education in the past. So, of course, once the state withdraws funding to support higher education as such, then institutions have to seek their own ways of finding resources and that can very often take negative – but sometimes positive – forms. Of course, the world is never perfect and even at the times when most of higher education was state funded that was never ideal. I think the withdrawal of the presence of the state in terms of public funding is problematic because we are bound to find new ways of economizing in universities and education and that is a general problem or a general challenge. The departure from state funding also causes problems in academia regarding the general advancement of the level of research and teaching. It is assessed in a quasi-economical way. Teaching is assessed by student satisfaction, which very much resembles customer satisfaction with any other services. And then with research, with many areas of research which cannot be immediately sold as relevant – for example in humanities and social sciences – that is being viewed as obsolete or basically unnecessary. And that is of course a huge danger because within humanities and social sciences for example there are many research areas of primary importance to society and to individuals. So I think the general trend we are talking about is negative, of course, from my perspective, at least, as somebody who works at the intersections of humanities and social sciences.

But if you think not only about humanities and social sciences, but also about natural sciences and engineering, researchers sometimes feel that this focus on applied research that can be sold in the market, which is important to universities and allows them to have some funds, in the long run, also hits the very foundation of applied science as the fundamental science that supports it is not immediately profitable or usable either...

Absolutely. I have always been interested in the application of my research, but then I operate in a particular research area. I have always been working in an engaged kind of analysis. But the question is different. The question is that this is a very simple way to classify some areas as “useful”, others as “not useful”; those areas we can “sell”, “those we cannot”, etc, that kind of talk. Because even applied science draws extensively on foundational, background research, which happens in areas like social theory, political sociology, theoretical sociology, and so on. So, if those areas would not be promoted that would eventually lead to applied research also running out of foundational ideas. So, it is not as simple as it seems to some people who say “this is useful, that is not useful”. Now, when we believe in interdisciplinarity, when we do finally practice – or at least try to practice – interdisciplinarity, and if we even want to go further towards trans- or post-interdisciplinarity seriously – then we have to recognize very clearly the importance of foundational research, especially for humanities and social sciences, in our case.

Who drives research policies? The Portuguese Foundation for Science and Technology mentions Germany as a model and claims that it can help the Portuguese scientific community to be successful in European calls by promoting a “greater alignment with the European programmes”. Do you think core countries are actually setting standards, research areas and priorities, and how can this impact on other countries, namely in our areas (social sciences and humanities) since they are so very context-specific?

Well, there has been some sort of a general trend for the academia, if you speak of the European example, to move towards the Anglo-Saxon model very much. One thing that we are missing, however, especially in the context of the British model, is that universities have always – despite a large proportion of state funding – had some sort of own economic initiative there, not to mention that studying at British Universities was always associated with lower or higher tuition fees. So, the Anglo-Saxon model has always had this drive, this economic element, but now we are seeing the same model being popularized and implemented across Europe. There are positive elements of that, of course, but the dangers are those we have spoken of before, of automatically spreading out the model to universities, and as long as universities can cope with that, as long as universities have enough of a balance – say, they are strong on social sciences, but also on natural sciences –, they can reach profit and profit making. But then there are universities which rely heavily on social sciences and humanities and they will not be able to defend themselves in the situation that we are now witnessing. So, there is a problem of finding the right balance, if you will. In your question, you mentioned Germany being presented as some sort of an important example for Portugal. I am not sure about this, and I do not know what was actually presented in the Portuguese context, but what I can say, what can be used perhaps as an argument in favour of using Germany and Britain as examples is that these are huge research communities, they are countries with very well established traditions of national funding in certain areas and of funding which transcends national borders. For instance, in Germany there is the Volkswagen Stiftung, which very often funds research in a larger German-speaking area – not just Germany, but also Austria, etc. But, what is important and what we should

not forget is that those countries which are now being presented as an example, first of all, have a huge academic landscape; they are countries with many universities – Germany has several dozens of universities, not to mention the UK. I think that as much as those models can be working in those particular national contexts, transposing them onto smaller countries – say, for example, Portugal, whose size can be compared perhaps to Austria – is not that easy simply because the academic community is much different in those countries and it is not guided as much as elsewhere by principles of academic competition. There are also problems because the real issue nowadays, and that is also important in the context of the crisis, is how sustainable the models which are presented to us actually are. Because we know that the German national and regional governments have this “Excellence Initiative” (Exzellenzinitiative) – currently in its second five-year round – where universities basically apply for some sort of “excellence status” which means additional money and additional state funding for a period of a few years. But, on the other hand, what is going to happen to that funding in a few years? We have universities which, for example, were in the first excellence initiative – but some of them lost this status, some of them gained or retained this status – but generally it means an additional influx of money, which, however, to my mind, cannot be used that very efficiently in a long term. It is very much of a project-ran money and the “big money” is a money which has to be spent within a few years period and universities cannot use it for their long-term development, for a long term establishment of, say, disciplinary or interdisciplinary research centres or institutes. So, I think the world is not as simple as some people think. Looking at how research is organised, how research funding is organized, it is very much nation-specific and that always has to be taken into consideration.

There is another dimension of this problem, which has to do with the research agenda, because it is not just the model – how you manage research centres. In order to be successful in European calls, first, of course, you need to enter the networks, and you also need to follow priorities in terms of research areas and problems, and these are not necessarily the ones that you feel are the most important at a specific moment...

But that is how it works, unfortunately, these days. I myself have experience in quite a few European-funded projects, which I very much appreciate because, of course, they give you a lot of international exchange in interdisciplinary research, in particular, and that is, I think, truly important. The problem being, however, that we very often have very good research ideas but then we check for current calls to cover those ideas. And if the calls and our ideas do not match, then of course we have to pursue our interests individually, which is very much a problem because we have teaching and administrative obligations, as well as academic ones. Of course, we know that there are consultations running on how to select topics, but I think that what we can observe now, especially in the humanities and social sciences, is a situation where relevant calls happen very rarely. So we have, say, one good call, one that would potentially give money to our current interests and our pressing research needs, but then for a few years there is nothing. And then when we have a situation like that with really relevant calls happening only once in a while, of course, competition increases very quickly and it is very difficult to get funded. Another issue is how we can deal

with projects when we get them because my experiences from different countries are very different. I think that of huge importance here is how much our institutions can support us in conducting research, not really from an academic perspective where we are usually fine, but actually in administering research, for example, how much support do we get so that we can really care about academic research rather than care about the administrative, financial and legal aspects of the projects. What happens in quite a few countries is that actually somebody who is the project leader has to deal with all those issues and then, of course, you do not have enough time to devote yourself to research even if you do get the funding for that research. So, that is also a huge danger, yes. So, it is definitely a huge challenge and if I knew the answer to solve all those problems I would be a rich man, but unfortunately I do not know that.

Considering this general trend towards a certain model of doing science and also the pressure to internationalize our work in this environment of strong competition and so on, I would like to know a little bit about the specific case of your country. What is happening in your country?

Well, first of all, I do not consider the way the internationalization of research now works – very monolingually – to be very negative, and I am sure I should not say that as a person who has worked on multilingualism. If I was to tell you from my own personal experience, I took part of my education when Poland was still a communist country and it was only due to the fact that research became internationalized and that we became English-speaking that one could get out of the national milieu and the strictly national – and often parochial – way of doing research. But we still have to remember that the EU is not equal throughout and there are still many countries that still need internationalization, that still need to counteract the local tendencies. So, I do consider this, to a large extent, a positive development. Of course, there are dangers in what we have spoken of. In my particular country, there is something that was initiated one or two years ago, a sort of a national council for research in humanities, which is supposed to enhance exactly this hugely disregarded foundational research in humanities and social sciences. There is a positive trend, but we always have to be careful and that comes back to the question about the state that you asked before, inasmuch as now research validity would be assessed not because of its academic but in fact national relevance. And here we could very easily fall into some strange, not to say nationalistic, trap which should never have its place in research. So, this is always a problem. But in any case Poland is now, at least trying to, in a way, advance humanities. We do not know what the results will be. I think that the first big call is now under review, so we will see the results and then we will know where this is actually going depending on the sort of projects that will eventually get funded and promoted. The problem with such initiatives is that, in a way, this becomes autopoietic, to speak in Niklas Luhmann's terms, because you can end up self-reproducing a sort of a "national research culture", which might actually fallout to meet some sort of international air and also it may fail to notice necessity to change or to improve because in international programmes you have the international peer reviewing, which, in a way, displaces the research and is hopefully – hopefully because that does not always happen – able to make it internationally valid. If we fall into this

national trap where you have national programmes, national reviewers, we may end up self-reproducing some mistakes, which weaken the research as well as its relevance for society – which nowadays is not anymore closed within the national borders. So, there are advantages and disadvantages and we are yet to see where all this is going.

You were talking about the centrality of the Anglo-Saxon model, and also language, because the journals that we aim to publish in are largely English-language journals. I was recently at an international conference and there was this Irish researcher who complained about the fact that the only language she knew was English and so she had this problem because her country is much more similar to southern European countries, but she cannot speak any of their languages. So, to what extent can this impact on Anglo-Saxon countries also in terms of the diversity of research and so on?

Well, there are a few questions in there, actually. I have been working on monolingualism and multilingualism for a few years, so I think there are no easy solutions to any of the problems we are talking about. As long as we are speaking about some sort of a functional monolingualism, which I think is there nowadays in academia, that does not necessarily have to be wrong because what we see now in conferences like this one is that for people from very different countries, very different disciplines, very different traditions, English is the medium which enables us all to meet and talk – and I am not in favour of English hegemony or anything like that, but there is simply a functional aspect to that. This is a different academia than the one we would have had some forty years ago. So, there is a positive side to that. The negative thing is when monolingualism becomes a cultural issue and when it starts to be used as an excuse for local national policies and eventually has an impact on societies losing languages for different reasons – for example, if we look at many countries where we have now monolingual language policies with regard to minorities and migrant groups. That is definitely another thing. If we are talking about academia, I think English allows us to communicate. Of course, we can always ask a very, very old question: “why should it be English, why is it not French”? But my experiences here are rather strange. I have been working in a project about multilingualism where we also tried to work multilingually and my experience is, to some extent, that claims for multilingualism are very often voiced by people who would like to promote their own language. So, in a way, the usual calls for multilingualism – for example, in academic conferences – come from French speakers who prefer to speak French than English, or by German speakers who would perhaps like to do the same, and not really from people like your Irish speaker you just mentioned. And my position is that we should find a common denominator in terms of a language that we can all express ourselves in, rather than ask why it is English, why it is French or whatever. Of course, there is a huge economic dimension to that because the publishing business is nowadays working in English and I think there is no reverse to that. And again, if you would ask for my personal experience, English was a key element to why I could work internationally. It is really difficult to deny that. I understand the cultural implications of monolingualism, but I think that, in terms of the academia, we still have to consider the functional issue and I would still say that this nowadays is still, to a large extent, a positive development just

because we are all able to speak, we are all able to exchange, because this enables networking, collaborations and interdisciplinarity. Imagine, for example, the internationally funded projects if there was not a common language we could use...

Despite the fact that, as you said, these transformations in your country are still going on, what are your feelings concerning their impacts on the diversity and quality of the research that is being conducted nowadays?

This is a very difficult question because I think it will have to be assessed depending on different areas, different issues, different disciplines, from which perspectives things are being researched. So, it is not really easy to respond to that. I think that the fact that the international academia is English-speaking very much acts to the advantage of the Anglo-Saxon academia – and to America, especially. On the other hand, if we look at the Anglo-Saxon academia – be it Britain, or be it America – it is rather advanced, with a very diverse research and a lot of ideas and theories or methodologies that we can draw from. In the European context, for example, British academia is such a huge area in terms of the number of universities and of different types of research being conducted. Of course, there is also the personal side of this because each of us here – and many people in the academia – are not native speakers of English and we always have the disadvantage of competing with other countries where English is the first language. But, again, that is something that we cannot do much about.

You were saying that this trend towards internationalization is somehow helping to enhance the quality of research in your country...

Yes, yes, definitely. In my country, I think that internationalization very much helps to come out of several of what Bourdieu called “deep seated dispositions” of research which in Poland have always been a huge problem in the academia. But fortunately, there is now some sort of a gradual and slow – through often not without obstacles – establishment of a new approach towards research and its function in society. So, in this particular case, I would consider this as positive. There are so many dimensions to that that we could talk about it for weeks, but particularly in the Polish case, I think this is important. But, then again, the question is that of abilities and how much the academia can actually make itself able to follow international trends. I think in Poland we are still looking ahead to much more internationalization, but fortunately the younger generation does not have that problem of languages which was very often an obstacle for many excellent colleagues – for example in Polish social sciences – becoming internationally prominent. Fortunately, since 1989 we have been quite consequent in teaching English and many other foreign languages and I think that we can see results of that in the Polish academia already.

Going back to the “crisis discourse”, are there any examples of resistance to this type of discourse that you can point out?

I think that what we need here is some sort of explanation because as much as I believe in the human individual and collective agency, we also have to be aware of the reality we live in. We cannot do wishful thinking. We have to be very realistic about how

much we can do and how much we can change. And we have to find ways for finding space for academic freedom, for academic advancement within the existing international context because we simply will not be able to change the international setting. Maybe when the academia was much more national, twenty or thirty years ago, that might have still been possible. Now, we are dealing with tendencies, which we cannot reverse. There have been international developments – such as, for example, the Bologna Strategy ten or so years ago – which we now cannot do much about. So, I am not sure, but, again, this is my recent Polish experience. In the Polish situation, whenever there was big resistance and big revolutions, there were winners and losers, and in the long run that always means that resisting something can mean gains for some, but losses for others and this is not what we should do, actually, because we should not take resistant forms that could produce and create new inequalities. We should rather eradicate already existing ones and create equality. So, in a way, I am very strange in my position here and less radical because I think it does not make sense, just because reality leads us to find a place therein and find a way of putting through our ideas and listening to others' rather than taking radical steps.

Can you think of any alternative forms of governance regarding education and research that can be enacted?

I think the alternative forms are to large extent the previous forms, actually. In the British academia we still have those elements of institutions, unfortunately not in the position that they used to be, which remind us of one of the basic academic principles, that is of self-governance. On the other hand, we also have to understand that the current situation in universities has in a way forced them to take this market-driven position and that also means that universities have to now have some sort of managers. But I am still very much against, e.g. in case of the British academia, to have managers replacing academics in leading positions. On the other hand, not all academics have big managerial skills. So, of course, we also have a double-bind here, and it is not really easy to find a positive solution to that.

Somewhere in between...

Somewhere in between, but I do not know where it is. I am very much in favour of academic self-governance, but I am also in favour of a drive towards taking much more responsibility. We also have to be realistic. There are times when we are required to be much more down the administrative runway, to not only produce international journals, to write publications, but to get those projects, to administer those projects, and there is simply not as much time left for academic self-government as we would like. Back in the times when we were conducting research and teaching as an element of overall advancement, that also meant that we still had the time to think about the milieu we were in and we had time for self-governance, for taking up some administrative tasks without much detriment to our research and teaching. Now, we simply do not have the time. That we cannot change and that opens up very quickly to some sort of managerial governance in universities. That is not good, but I think there is very little we can do about it.

Taking into consideration all the matters you focused on, but looking at the students' side, what do you think are the positive and negative impacts of all these changes?

I think this is a very difficult question because the expectations and the needs of the students in academia have changed so much. And this is also because we have moved from a very wealthy Europe to a Europe of scarcity of resources and with a lot of inequalities. And to me it is not really surprising that all students ask about when they want to study is their employability after finishing the university. How much will these studies eventually help me to get a job, sustain my family and my children, and so on? So, students now demand we teach stuff that is applicable and has relevance and I think that is a challenge for us because we still have to, as much as possible, also try and teach them about general, foundational ideas, but also about how they relate to everyday practice, to social practice, to economic practice. Maybe twenty, thirty, forty years ago we could have been producing many people in foundational areas, but nowadays it seems we just cannot afford it. The other thing is that in many countries we already have a lot of established systems of doing two subjects, or two streams, majors and minors combined, and that, I think, is an extremely good idea. For example, the Polish example is very traditional and that is very dramatic. I studied in Germany at the end of the nineties and there was already a very well established system back then because it is a system that gives you opportunities in different areas and even if there is one foundational area, the other one would be more applied and you create a person that is a much more different individual, much more flexible in terms of professional chances. So, I think that already changed very much, but we have to fully understand what the students want and expect from us because it is just a different world we are living in, it is a world with scarcity of resources, it is a world of unemployment and I understand that those are economic, social functions that we need to respond to as far as students' expectations. We should not, on the other hand, over-economize; we should not overestimate the economic, but I think it is pretty understandable that people want to ask questions – “ok, I am going to study, but what am I going to do with it, what do I get from that?” That, of course, can take much more extreme forms in a context such as this because nowadays in many countries, say the UK, we have to pay quite a lot for your university education and then one asks the question “why should I start my professional activity with that huge debt on my shoulders?” and “would that education give me the ability to pay it, as well?” It is maybe easier in other countries, but I think it is exactly the same question. So, I fully understand students' expectations and that we should not be blaming students. We should be more flexible. Of course, the problem is that this comes at a time when we academics are required to do much, much more and when we have less and less time to think of teaching or research strategies that would fit much better the students' expectations. This is very often not exactly about the contents of what the students expect, but also about the forms of teaching and transferring knowledge that students expect us to use. I once met by accident a person – who turned out to be a student at the university where I worked before and he told me that maybe what he received in terms of contents was not eventually relevant to his future work. He said that, for example, the fact that he was studying while conducting different projects and taking part in project work eventually increased very much his professional chances because, as we

know, contemporary business is very much project-based. So maybe, after all, we should not focus – as we used to – as much on improving contents but also on the forms of knowledge transfer and on which actual skills students thus acquire. And that, of course, also means, for us, the necessity to evaluate the work that we do regularly, to be self-reflexive as far as our teaching, and the necessity to change and improve things if need be.

Is there something else you want to add to this conversation?

No, let's hope things will get better although they do not look good these days. But I would not be too negative after all. There are, as I mentioned, some positive aspects of all that is happening and let's hope this crisis will also teach us something. I always have this "Catholic approach" to it: that we should first of all always start correcting mistakes from ourselves. It is not just the system; it is not just the students, it is also us and our ability to change. Let us start thinking about how the academia is and the way it should be in contemporary societies and how it should look in the future. This is not the system we had back in 1968, or sometime around that. The world is so much different! The Europe we lived in was much wealthier, as we know, and often eating out the resources of future generations, and that's scarcity we now have to deal with. So, I think this requires a lot of flexibility. I would be positive about the future, but, first of all, let us be honest with ourselves and let us see what we as academics, what we as scholars have to do to be much more responsible vis-à-vis the students, vis-à-vis society and vis-à-vis the future generations.

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