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Interesting Times, *Bolognese Style*

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Before Bologna

The Department of Anthropology at ISCTE-Lisbon (a public university institute) can be used as a typical example of anthropological teaching in Portugal since the reestablishment of democracy in 1974. Undergraduate students – who entered the free and public university system after exams and a *numerus clausus* selection – would engage in a 4-year program that was almost exclusively focused in Social Anthropology, after which they would be issued the diploma of "Licenciatura". Typically the best students could envisage being hired as Assistants in a Department, thus starting their careers as scholarly anthropologists. Two-year Master's Degrees weren't launched until the nineties, and the typical PhD candidate would do her research in an individual and tutorial relationship with the supervisor. This system created a few generations of highly trained young scholars and researchers who were to benefit from the expansion of the university system. Huge increases in the student population until the mid-nineties, and the establishment of a modern research funding system benefiting from European funds allowed for the largest ever growth in academic and scientific production in Portugal.

The Bologna Scare

Warning signs appeared in the nineties – from high rates of unemployment for students holding a Licenciatura degree, to the impossibility of hiring new professionals for the Departments due to government budget restrictions. As in many other areas (the welfare state, for instance) Portugal entered the "neo-liberal era" in an ambiguous position. On the one hand, there was a widely felt need for reform of the rather "pre-modern" hierarchical, paternalistic, and class-based university culture inherited from the past. On the other, however, there was a sense that the recent social and democratic public university system was threatened by trends towards privatization and commodification – and a fear that social sciences and the humanities would be even more affected. When Bologna was announced the political left, including sectors in the student movement, denounced it as a device for the mass production of unskilled students who would have to take Master's degrees if they were to have any credit in the academic and job markets. And these, of course, would have to be paid – and prices would abide to free market rules.

The Bologna Chance

Some people who had sound reasons to believe this to be true (myself included) thought, however, that Bologna could also be an opportunity. It could be a chance to radically modify old ways of teaching and old curricula. The market logic could, after all, be used to fight old "modes of production" – it could take us from a "feudal" to a "bourgeois" situation, so to

speak.... The Department of Anthropology at ISCTE engaged in a full-fledged restructuring of the curriculum and the syllabi; we seized the Bologna opportunity so as to implement a less specialized 3-year Licenciatura (structured in 5 pillars with 3 levels each: anthropological theory, anthropological analysis, ethnography, methodology, and social sciences); we widened the range of optional courses and courses in other social sciences; we offered 2-year Master's courses that could still be financially accessible for most students; we established connections between teaching and research, namely by channeling students to do their graduate work within the funded projects in our research centers; and we are now implementing a 3-year Doctoral program that will replace the old strictly tutorial system.

Bologna, Year One

We have now finished our first Bologna year. I hope I will be proven wrong, but there is a sense of disappointment in the air. We were confronted with the fact that many Universities and departments (not necessarily Anthropology departments, of which there are only 4 in the country) understood Bologna as a mere bureaucratic imposition to be followed. They seem to have simply squeezed their 4 or 5-year Licenciatura curricula and syllabi into 3 years. University administrations were not able to adapt to new modes – for instance, our intention to let students build their own curriculum at their own pace, following the chances offered by the ECTS credit system, was “boycotted” by a bureaucratic logic that insisted in organizing students into the old system of rigid classes and courses, making mobility and personal specialization very difficult.

Unfortunately it does seem that the neo-liberal scare lurking behind Bologna may after all be rational. Will our students be able to achieve the same standards that they did with the old Licenciatura? Won't they be pushed into Master's Degrees that will have to be paid for? Won't Departments have to compete for students in times of demographic recession? And in order for that competition to be successful, won't the “products” offered (that is the lingo being used today at the universities...) have to sell the illusion of the market applicability? Or, on the other hand, will the “downgraded” 3-year courses allow for growing rates of formal education, something this country still desperately needs? These are indeed interesting times. *Bolognese* style.

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