

# THE UNIVERSITY AND ITS STUDENTS. A LOOK FROM *WITHIN*<sup>1</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

This text is an essay about university teaching practices through a multi-scale sociological exercise, combining multiple and complementary scales of observation: social singularities; the classroom; institutions; educational policies and social spaces. Examples of everyday university life are presented, using an ethnographic approach *from within*.

## KEYWORDS

University; students; teaching relations; multi-scale sociology

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## CONSIDERING THE UNIVERSITY FROM A DAY-TO-DAY PERSPECTIVE: AN INTRODUCTION

As members of a university, we often forget to think about the university and when we do - in very abstract contexts - we do not draw consequences from this exercise. After all, routines require weak reflexivity that nurtures predictability, “work obligations” and interactional procedures that monitor and organise situations with the aim of reducing their intrinsic complexity. The common reservations regarding knowledge about the world and social implications are the basis of norms and their interpretations, establishing interpretations, scenarios and repertoires, which appear with a more attentive observation of rituals. They are necessary, to the point of being fundamental. But, in the horrors of disorder, they rectify order and consensus. Furthermore, the multiple social roles which we are forced to assume do not communicate frequently amongst themselves, thus becoming an example of the system’s colonisation of the living world, as the German sociologist Habermas, famously referred to as the victory of instrumental reasoning over organised, critical, open and rational debate (Habermas, 2003).

One of the conditions of a sociology *of* the university and *within* the university is to not ignore the complexity (Pinto, 1994). What I intend to defend is the idea of the complexity based on *looking from within*. This looking is the beginning of sociological reason itself: approaching the contexts, in which it is constituted, such as discipline, methodology, perspectives, languages and relations. Looking over the parameters in which it is reproduced, although in science, reproduction does not have to mean sameness, but first provokes innovation which is consensual, shared and collective while reproduction requires micro-revolutions in order to remain active, constructive, inspiring and mobilising.

Therefore, the look from within evaluates the scientific communities, the theoretical and social conditions in which science is conducted, the perspectives that create objects,

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hierarchies and capital that cumulate in a game with highly codified protocols. However, the sociologist as a teacher is often forgotten, an agent of the creation of meanings that are constructed through pedagogical relations, a strongly contextualized performance, which features both *intra* and *extra* dimensions.

So as not to miss anything, it is important to deepen the economy of the *look from within*, what it requires, in order to overcome the naivety of a naturally spontaneous approach, to examine the classroom through a game of scales of observation: macro, meso and micro-analysis. In short, multiplying the angles and perspectives and interweaving them with each step.

#### **A MACRO SCALE: THE STATE, EDUCATIONAL POLICIES AND SOCIAL SPACE**

On a macro scale, it is important to understand that in the classroom, several processes are interconnected, such as those resulting from frames of reference established by educational policies, which are often contradictory and seldom explicit. It is within these frames of references that the State's role is implied and perpetuated - a certain vision of society and the individual, bureaucratic but also hegemonic and an ideological, a vision which is never homogenous, vibrant or languid in a pool of possibilities and constraints, the idea and the establishment of a common good, of public service, of equality and of justice.

The composition of the classroom, on the other hand, is not immune to the position which higher education occupies as a national project, even the configuration of social inequalities, as unequal resources have been deployed from the students' origins and throughout their paths.

It is important to understand, as Firmino da Costa and I stated in 2008, when coordinating the project entitled 'Students and their Journeys in Higher Education' (*Os Estudantes e os Seus Trajetos no Ensino Superior - ETES*) (Costa, Lopes & Caetano, 2014), that public higher education, particularly at third level, has absorbed a growing number of students over the past decades, diversifying the public and increasing the efficiency of graduates (the growth in numbers of graduates as opposed to the contingent of enrolled students), a phenomenon which is simultaneous to the process of *massification with democratization* (always incomplete and insufficient). According to Pordata, the enrolment rate for higher education in 2013 was 53.1%, whereas in 1980 it barely rose above 10% (Pordata, 2013). The students we will find in the classrooms are, therefore, from diverse social backgrounds, sometimes even contrasting ones. Many of their parents would have had a much lower level of education, which alerts us to dynamics of cultural capital, namely recent and extra-familial acquisition. The level of education of those who are now 21 years old is three times higher than that of their parents. Therefore, we find a wide variety of cases of students that represent - in a family (and class) history, marked by exclusion from educational institutions - the first examples of entrance to the once sacred temple of higher education. We cannot understand, for example, the so-called "academic practice" if we do not understand this historical and sociological novelty.

However, we must bear in mind that such “originality” in Portuguese society does not mean neglecting the phenomena of reproducing class structures. If it is true that a considerable portion of young people with poorly-educated parents are still studying at 21 years of age, it is just as true the majority of the individuals who are working at that same age come from disadvantaged families in terms of educational capital. Similarly, it must be noted that the higher the educational level of the parents, the smaller the percentage of failures (Faria, 2014).

A recent study on success, failure and dropping-out of the University of Lisbon, coordinated by Almeida (Almeida, 2013), shows that students from more educated families are over-represented within the university population. However, if we compare: in the 1960s, according to the pioneering studies of Sedas Nunes, students from privileged backgrounds were 160 times more likely to have access to higher education (Nunes, 1968); in 1999 a study by Almeida estimated this difference at 20 times more likely; the most recent investigation coordinated by the same sociologist reduced the estimates to three times more likely, with a higher selectivity in Medicine, Pharmaceuticals and the Fine Arts, and a more intense democratization in Languages, Psychology and Educational Sciences.

A recent debate, regarding the declarations made by the German Chancellor, brought a consensus that had been considered non-existent: those involved in the controversies recorded that 25.3% of the population of the European Union between 15 and 64 years old had completed higher education, while the Portuguese percentage was 17.6% and the German figures were at 25.1%. But does the rhetoric walk hand-in-hand with education policies? Recent figures show a deceleration in the rate of higher education since 2006, whilst it was also observed that in 2009, Portugal was among the six countries in the EHEA (European Higher Education Area) with losses of higher education students (European Commission, 2010).

The previously mentioned ETES project, notes that, from a statistical analysis of a vast source of data on student progress and schooling successes, that this depends, above all, on the characteristics of the educational institutions; the kind of teaching and area of study; age; the organization of the academic calendar (and the unequal degrees of investment in studying and class attendance) plus the public attendance of secondary education (which, contrary to the trending rankings of secondary schooling, generically meets its target with studies of continuous improvement of UP services). In other words, the social selection goes either upstream, taking the course of obligatory education, or downstream, through the processes and logistics of recruitment within the institutions, in association with the teaching ranks (Martins, 2012).

We should look at these tendencies through the two perspectives of an unfinished modernity (Machado & Costa, 1998), where we note permanencies and ruptures. For my part, given the unprecedented acceleration of the last decades, I emphasize the intensity of change.

The students of today, in their social plurality and the multi-determined (because it is multi-socialised) genesis of their cultural capital, challenge the model of the *inheritor*.

The social, cultural and linguistic complexity of the classroom is a powerful reality in this day and age, with the potential for misconceptions, misunderstandings and conflicts, and yet, despite that, with the capital of hope that it also represents, and we should never lose sight of that. Those who still believe in the illusion of homogeneity should think again.

Returning again to the available data - 23% of sociology students are 28 years old and above (16% at FLUP). 1/3 receives a social services grant (27% at FLUP). 16% are working while they study (11% at FLUP) (Universidade do Porto, 2012). Even given the scarcity of the information (the profession, level of schooling and conditions of the parents of over 50% of sociology and literature students are unknown, inhibiting any kind of rigorous analysis (Universidade do Porto 2014) these numbers clearly show the intensity of heterogeneity.

#### **A MESO SCALE (1): THE CLASSROOM EXISTS WITHIN AN INSTITUTION**

It is important to deepen the middle scale. In reality, the classroom does not border on the ethereal, but is embedded in an institution with an organizational matrix, a certain mission, a way of presenting, representing and staging values, objectives, patterns of efficiency and the optimization of resources, an organization plan, a division of labour, a hierarchy that defines the degrees of the inequality of power, of control, of the centralisation of procedures and resources. It would not be without relevance to the world that takes place within the classroom, if these university organizations possess social and academic integration mechanisms, such as accompaniment and counselling offices, whether psychological or educational or even professional; if moments of receiving new students are structured; if student guides exist, which are crucial when various courses place an emphasis on the first year at a time with all the transitions and the climax of abandonment (which also happens at UP, according to available studies); if diagnostic observations and evaluations of teaching processes and systems of integration quality are stimulated, with production and systematic analysis of indicators of teaching and learning (Veloso Neto, Costa, & Lopes, 2010) and detection of changeable-variables; if good practices of social support are promoted, such as grants and prizes; if they encourage the work of research units in participating in an active life; if support offices are created for students with special needs; if they listen to and integrate opinions and participations; in sum, if they orientate and support:

1. Access
2. Integration (social and academic)
3. The maintenance of success.
4. Professional integration.

Therefore, it is important to know if these facets communicate amongst themselves and if they are planned according to the university's new missions in mind (that which Boaventura de Sousa Santos calls the transition from "university knowledge" to "pliversity knowledge") or, conversely, if they yield to the logic of an ever more transitional

teaching-learning trade, in which the “efficiency, the quality and the educational responsibilities are defined in market terms” (Santos, 2005, p. 13) and the society of information and the growing materialization of the economies are used as a pretext for an omnipresent and omnipotent “metaphysical management”, one-dimensional in its objectives and processes and within the realm of the university which it intends to institute. There exists an abyss between the “social irresponsibility” of universities, autarchic and even parochial, deaf to the singing of social actors and their dynamics, expectations and necessities, and the “new missions” or epopees that condemn to irrelevancy everything that does not fit with the weak criterion of “utility”, “productivity” or “application”.

#### **A MESO SCALE (2): THE FRAMES OF INTERACTION IN THE CLASSROOM**

It is important that we understand how a classroom is traversed, whether through education policies, organizational complexes or divisions and visions of social space (Bourdieu, 2010). However, at the same time, it is crucial that the interaction assumes its own relevance, as a context of definition, negotiation and construction of reality, through communication exchanges that constantly remind us of the sharing of meaning or of conflicts in its interpretation. In the framework of interaction that classroom is, it becomes relevant to detect the articulations between the various scales of social fabrication and observation. It is true that students possess a location in the social space. In terms of social class, considered from a multi-dimensional perspective, in the wake of Weber and Bourdieu, as an appropriation and unequal mobilisation of resources (economic, social, political, cultural, symbolic), but also a genre, an ethnicity, a sexual orientation, and eventually a religion... It is also true that these dimensions of structural localisation combine with unequal social relations that inhabit socialised bodies, which in turn express themselves through convention, more or less ritualized, more or less foreseen. The incarnation of the social marks and proprieties presupposes, in a tense and concomitant way, a process of subjectivity and singularity (Ferreira, 2008).

#### **A MICRO SCALE: THE SOCIALLY PRODUCED INDIVIDUAL SINGULARITIES**

On a micro-sociological scale, we observe in detail that each student is a living example of the variations that result from a combination of dispositions (acting, thinking and feeling) and contexts. In other words: *each student is a plural subject in a plural world*. In them we find, in an ever-changing way, processes and multiple principles of socialisation, resulting from the exposition to a myriad of socialisation agents, in rather different contexts (family, school, leisure, neighbourhood, association, friends, colleagues...) and where they forge social relations in which they invest in an unequal way, according to the position they occupy in its activation, but also according to the social role they play and the reflexive distance between this ensemble or network of social roles (Lahire, 2013).

Apart from their origin, the students have a journey. Beyond the journey, a project, albeit a project which is assumed differently and very unequally implemented. In the

classroom, origins, journeys and projects are translated through a thousand hints, expressed and prohibited, spoken and silent.

In the aforementioned ETES study, we find *regular* and *expected journeys*, at the top and at the baseline, confirming the prediction of social origins. However, we also find *contradictory journeys*; *ascending* and *descending* that contradict the fatal force of the variable matrix. Furthermore, we found journeys focused on education; journeys with inflections; journeys with transitional problems (to an adult life in general; to higher education, in particular); journeys with conciliation problems between spheres of life (family, studies, work...); journeys with integration difficulties in higher education (academic and social) and, finally, journeys with problems relating to teaching methods.

Over the course of their journey, each student is, first and foremost, a young person. In each one, there exist structural inequalities but also active inequalities. A young person lives in worlds of life (Schütz, 1962) prone to transitions (to adult life, to work, to conjugality). Such worlds codify themselves at times in sub- and even micro-cultures. Allowing them to be raw materials of the teaching relationship depends largely on our normative orientations and teaching performances.

When a group of female students challenge me on an excess of class hours, I come to understand the hours that the university adds to each day, with, at times, arduous journeys from a far-away village of the nearby county of Penafiel or the confines of the almost neighbouring city of Santa Maria da Feira, even from the metropolis of Porto. I also understand that, as women, they assume a tremendous weight of domestic chores, which the brothers and fathers avoid, that adds to their own work of taking care of themselves (hygiene, time-consuming grooming especially “when you have long hair”), demanding assignments and classes, exercised before entering in the scene, in this *catwalk* that University is and where the self-compared an self-integrated becomes part of the *university body*, but is also subjective and singular. I also understand, through interaction, that the economic resources are meagre because the social origins are modest but that, in spite of the restricted range of cultural practices of the parents, many of them are interested in photography, cinema, alternative music and literary writing. They finally tell that, despite the professors’ stiff reminders that university students should competently manage the English language, that reading in this language is difficult for them. However, on the various occasions on which this occurs, there is an intense desire to transition between Portuguese and English, whether in the passing of one sentence to the other (code switching, according to the proposed concept by various American linguists - cf. Lahire, 2002), or even a mixture of languages in the same sentence (code mixing), which happens frequently when we speak about the use of new media and cyberspace.

Heterogenic linguistic habits (more so than they themselves suppose!) and partially incongruent but decidedly plural cultural repertoires, have an interpretative hypothesis that would surprise some sociological reason but that reiterates the importance of “the study of the process of *using* words and sentences in the contexts of social conduct. Meaning is not built by guessing games but by the intersection of the production of meaning with objectives and world events, harnessed and organised by the agent”

(Giddens, 1996, p. 300). If not everything is possible in the fabrication of language, if the agent is creative within an “normatively governed” orchestration, as Chomsky says, it is still important to not forget that the agency exists in social action, that is, the contextual adaptation, the translation of determined living worlds (Schütz, 1962) for others, of potential metamorphosis, as understood by Gilberto Velho, the Brazilian anthropologist, who takes the concept to the Latin poet Ovid, in the attempt to understand the transition between distinct realities, or provinces of meaning, in social phenomenological meaning (Velho, 2003).

Not infrequently I surprise myself with meanings that I did not know associated to certain words that, in turn, refer to the creased realities of the youth. I investigate these unusual uses and I journey, from afar but with a closer look, *a look from within*, the meanings that the students themselves attribute to their experiences and (sub)cultural transitions. When this dialogue is happier, I invite them to discover dimensions of their experiences that are given little thought, or none at all, for this is another of the definitive characteristics of social practices: possesses layers of meaning which are not immediately transparent to social agents, or just accessible from a greater reflexive effort.

In a course I lecture, I insist that the students follow the steps of Garfinkel, in the experimental questioning of practical reasons and mundane common sense, with the aim of constructing an inter-subjectively shared order (Garfinkel, 1984) through collectively constructed and constituted standards. When the “rules” of social games are broken, in the experiences of rupture, what was intended to stay implicit and typified surfaces: the situation of “faculty”, decomposed into expectations and situations that, by repetition, are amply interiorized in a practical - as opposed to a reflexive - manner, like necessary measures. “Try” - I tell them - “to leave the classroom and go through the corridors of the department in search of colleagues. When you find them, ask them: ‘What are you doing here? Why are you here?’ Take note of the answers and, after repeating the experiment two or three times with different speakers, return to the classroom to debate the recorded answers.” There were those that returned dumbfounded: the reactions were of amazement, incredulity; or of laughter and mockery; or even the perception of momentary insanity. No-one usually questions the fact of being here and now. But, upon doing so, those are the rules of social interaction and definition of the situations that emerge all around the splendour of their precariousness.

Other times, it is the inherent sociological method that imposes the ruptures. Mistrust, deconstruction and the search for appropriate sociological explanations for phenomena as frequent as the abuse of alcohol, domestic violence and its effects or the failure and abandonment of education, make us put within brackets the hypotheses that were thought of as certainties, the beliefs that were considered absolute, the partial and contextualized representations, which came with a type of clichéd intellectual passport or even prejudiced (I always remember the quote from the philosopher Bachelard: “You will be as old as your prejudices”). Therefore, it propagates an attitude of methodical distrust in face of spontaneous and often heroic interpretations, like absolute free will or the different biological behaviours between genders. The consensus, once again, is shaken.

But I try, as a method, to listen to the student interpretations to better contextualize and deconstruct at the same time.

#### **RETURNING TO THE IRREPLACEABILITY OF THE CLASSROOM AS THE INTERACTION OF CO-PRESENCE**

I am not apocalyptic nor do I renounce the innumerable advantages of new media, of the floating navigation of cyberspace, from the transitions between reality and virtual-reality or the logical network of hyper-reality. But I am strongly convinced of the irreplaceable nature of the face-to-face teaching practice in a classroom setting, as it is the only means of condensing the complex potential of contextualised social relations. Verbal and non-verbal language, paralanguage and the comings and goings between the concrete situation and the totality of the accumulated social experience - those are some of the possible resources with which to create presuppositions of understanding. Or by departing from misunderstanding as a transforming occasion in which, at its end, each one of the speakers is changed.

The classroom is one of the best examples that time is not an a-historical essence but rather a evolvment of happenings, an overlap of meaning and contexts, only accessible analytically if - as I intend to demonstrate - the scales of observation are multiplied in the direction of a sociology that does not dispense with intersections and crossings. A multi-scale sociology. A sociology that is not content with the pleasure of disillusion (Bourdieu, 1999) but which is forever growing, through the look from within, an intrinsic dignification of social agents.

Nowadays, there is an enormous deficit in the realisation of the best expectations of teachers and students. There is, above all, a tremendous weight of old and new social inequalities. However, there is still space for meaningful interpersonal work to develop for teachers and students. This margin may seem narrow. But can it be doubted? The belief in its existence is, after all, a good reason for the University.

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