

Caught in the culture(s) war: The Teacher Training Colleges in Portugal

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I propose to seriously address some forms of oppression and exclusion operating in higher education in Portugal. To do so does not, however, imply a revolution in thinking or a change of paradigms; only the adoption of an alternative point of view from the hegemonic. The core issue I want to problematise is the tension felt between the university and the polytechnic as higher education competing structures, in particular the Teacher Training Colleges, which will be represented as featuring a certain institutional contestation. While speaking of a particular college, that of Castelo Branco, from the inside, I will try to analyse global positions, settings and themes shared by other Polytechnic Teacher Training Colleges, in apparently fierce competition with Education and Humanities departments of several universities. My narrative is therefore about antagonistic relationships in the cultures for learning in higher education. In a way, it attempts to problematize the core/periphery relations between universities in big towns (or "old" universities) and the "new" polytechnics, particularly their teacher training colleges, with a view to opening up some sort of dialogue on the cultures for learning in Portugal at higher education level. This involves defining trajectories of learning in both; avoiding the lack of relation or the bad relations and the "mutually exclusive" myth which hangs over the dichotomy university - polytechnic; illuminating the cultural and political positions of both and how they affect students, teaching staff and their strategies of representation. I will refer, first, to English as a Foreign Language as one subject area where the high versus low culture debate is felt by teachers and students alike with contradictory results. Secondly, I will briefly sketch the institutional debate of the high and the low as lived in the Polytechnics and Universities. And to conclude, in the third part, some theoretical backgrounding to the problems raised will be built so as to generalise key issues of multicultural education at higher education level.

I

The position from which I speak involves, first, the personal: my experience of teacher and of former student of three different but related subjects in the humanities: English as a Second Language, English Literature and English Culture at higher education level, at a university, and at a teacher training college in the polytechnic. The slice of "lived experience", of my professional and intellectual biography I select unapologetically, though I know (and you know) that it cannot be but a middling, unnoticed, peripheral trajectory which attempts to relate to recent developments of cultural and literary studies with reference to the British/American western cultural and postmodern context.

Though not very often articulated, many teachers of English as a Foreign Language of my generation (i.e. having graduated from universities, before the mid 1980's) must have felt at the crossroads of two very different cultures for learning - that of their university background, canonical, "high", based on literature; and that of their training as teacher of English either through in-service or through a post-graduate course, based on communicative approaches to language, on linguistics, on the "popular" and the low through the use of non-canonic materials like music, television discourse, advertising language and texts from newspapers and women's or pop journals. The canon felt as safe ground and knowledge (with capital K), lodged in the

university and sheltered by a school culture which emphasised learning for the sake of itself; while the teaching practice materials and the schools as professional places caused anxiety and clashed with the canon, causing suspicion as to their validity. On the other hand, these curricula based on the low felt challenging for the students at secondary education level and for some teachers, but nonetheless shifty terrain when compared to the university curricula. Being little heard of at the university, and thus practically invisible in academic terms, there were problems in proving their worth. Furthermore, covering a big canvas in subject-matter and being multidisciplinary in order to lodge the interests of a wide variety of students and to address at least some of their interests, the theorisation of what was going on, when attempted, sounded to cultural megalomania. Basically, what both formations (University graduation and Post-graduate certificate in TESOL) do is create in every teacher of English a tension between the Arnoldian definition of culture as "the best" (taught at university) and Raymond William's cultural-anthropological turn to "a whole way of life", or rather to the many diverse cultures one individual's life opens on to, when s/he enters professional life.

This individual negotiation that many teachers have experienced has an institutional counterpart, where the tension between the high and the low becomes a "war" felt with even greater poignancy. When the Teacher Training Colleges - *Escolas Superiores de Educação* - were created in Portugal as Polytechnic schools, in the beginning of the 1980's, they were implicitly called to "police" and "limit" acceptable knowledge for higher education and simultaneously to "invent" curricula where the initial teacher training skills plus basic subject knowledge were expected to be integrated in a harmonious way. Thus, there the tensions between the high and the low - the literary and the cultural tradition - coming from these two learning modes, were indeed felt as clashing by the teachers involved. Choosing a curriculum involves not only cultural, but essentially political choices, in this case a difficult negotiation between alternative ways of thinking on education (especially in the humanities), which led the Teacher Training Colleges many ways, though they never consciously and frontally adopted one line of cultural policy against that of the universities teaching in similar subject areas.

In the humanities, for example, a curriculum based on the cultural studies paradigm seemed better fitted to respond to the training needs of student teachers in a foreign language as well as for them to be able to negotiate a position in between the EFL tradition and the traditional high literary canons. Nonetheless, the easy option for the Teacher Training Colleges at their inception was to maintain the university curricular framework in what concerned academic subjects and add to it an integrated initial teacher training and school practice. They emphasized however the pedagogical constructs of their courses as their trademark and were advised to do so, for theirs was not the role of "conservators of the tradition". Their mission was seen as educational and professional, and their aim to be able to approach the world of schools outside the academy. Being smallish institutions, with limited numbers of students - 20 or 30 per year per course - they had the time and the space to incorporate into the acts of judgement and valuation which every curriculum entails and which belonged to the university inheritance, the own culture of their teachers recruited from several levels of schooling, and that of the students, from which to depart towards new articulations¹.

Though it would seem, from its difficult political, economic and cultural position, that the specific culture for learning of the polytechnic colleges should experiment with a move from the high to the low, the student motivation for innovative moves which challenge the university canon is quite low, especially when courses are similar in structure to university ones. The reasons for this are sociological and political.

Among the student population, who come predominantly from the lower social classes and from a regional context; urban and rural, few have chosen to study at the Polytechnic; their low marks have been the cause of their not getting a place at the university and consequently they

cannot but rightly feel as second rate university students, which is highly prejudicial for their self-esteem and that of teachers, who they contagiously consider second-rate, too. They feel alienated from "mainstream" higher education and culturally ambiguous due to their invisibility and inaccessibility to a national voice /audience in the media, for whenever educational issues and students are "news", it's always university students in the big towns, which further accentuates their peripheral provincial feelings.

For these students in particular, there is a need for the high culture of universities to be seen as school culture and therefore *other* from what they live everyday - because higher education still counts for a majority of these students as upward social mobility - and to become a *doutor* / graduate is seen as a path for successful academic and professional achievement against family backgrounds where fathers and mothers are labourers or shopkeepers with little or no schooling. It is but natural that they lack confidence in experimenting, in making excursions outside the canon, for they feel top-down authoritative and high culture models as natural and comfortable, meeting their expectations. Student positions may be inevitably framed by the cultural formations and practices of the school culture they have experienced, as Donald Macedo (1994) contends, adding that the formal educational system inculcates "dominant cultural doctrines at the expense of critical thinking and agency", because it favours acquisition of knowledge over production and because education is instrumental in professionalization. Overall, despite certain excursions into fragments of "'low culture' materials", school culture has predominantly centered on high culture, thus becoming for students synonymous to the former.

However, I see these students inhabiting the struggle between the desire to represent themselves through the strategies available at the universities and to validate and incorporate into them the sense of belonging to some new higher education structure, as yet weak in its self-definition, but challenging as more professionally-oriented. After graduation and their first year of teaching experience, they feel over-confident in the training they have had as compared to other teachers trained by universities and they feel pride in the courses they took. The struggle lies in the academic years themselves and the easy way out - that of conforming to the dominant patterns - leads them to copy the experiences and cultural practices of the university through the adoption of similar strategies of representation: the academic suit of the students in Castelo Branco is similar to the one worn at the very traditional University of Coimbra, they enact similar initiatory or celebratory rituals on freshmen through the streets of Castelo Branco, so that, in the end, academic culture² in Castelo Branco looks like that in Coimbra (the oldest university in Portugal and one of the most conservative in curricula and courses), in a smaller scale obviously, which shows the students' wish to identify with the higher education life as lived in traditional university towns with centuries of tradition.

II

To tell the inside story of a Teacher Training College signifies simultaneously to make one voice heard which is only seldom heard in the context of higher education in Portugal and to explain why that is so. For the average reader, this paper is narrating a subaltern account, speaking from a peripheral geographic location in Portugal and in Europe. This is purportedly not a grand narrative I am following, but just a story of personal experience as teacher of English, a statement of how representations of the Polytechnic colleges, and of how some teachers imagine themselves to be operating, can illuminate the constitution and the problems facing the teacher training colleges in Portugal. I am referring implicitly to the words of Stuart Hall (1996, 473) when he states that

(...) it is only through the way in which we represent and imagine ourselves that we come to know how we are constituted and who we are. There is no escape from the politics of representation, and we cannot wield "how life really is out there" as a kind of test against which the political rightness or wrongness of a particular cultural strategy or text can be measured.

Involved is a critique on the attempts that have been made to silence and to "other", to marginalise, the voice, the reality and the culture of the Teacher Training Colleges in a predominantly "university" milieu as a consequence of geopolitical location and of cultural practices. To counterbalance this, I am detailing what has been reduced to stereotype, simplified or homogenized, thereby attempting to destabilize the meaning of the university as dominant discourse, hegemonic and obliterating of diversity (since it represents and is used as synonym for higher education). Only by evading the paradigm of the university as the predominant and therefore the "natural" self-evident discourse, can there be talk about a multicultural and multitextual higher education system, where the question of what kind of knowledge is being taught can be asked.

Though regarded as not significant politically, the national net of Teacher Training Colleges, created a decade ago, tried to develop specific statuses of staff-student relations in a more open, interdisciplinary, unconventional setting, where the pedagogics of the cultures for the transmission of knowledge was carefully pondered.

The Teacher Training Colleges, integrated in Polytechnics, and located in medium to big towns, have constituted development centers for those most of the times peripheral towns. They have inserted "foreign" elements into local communities, some times destabilising local hierarchies of power and of taste, through the presence of its students, and of its teachers who partly come from the local community, and in part are recruited from other places - Lisbon, Coimbra -, the majority having graduated there.

But the polytechnic colleges are not really an alternative to the university, for there is an invisible power emanating which reaches out from the university and manifests itself in the discursive and scientific monopoly of the universities which do not allow the polytechnics to politically negotiate their own discursive and scientific identity (the trouble lies obviously also inside the leaders of the polytechnics, who for a long time submitted to the all-powerful universities). The smallness of the polytechnics and their geographical position away from the political centre which is Lisbon, has resulted in powerlessness.

There are forms of intellectual colonialism accepted by the ESEs (Escolas Superiores de Educação) which are linked with their crisis of identity formation, and one has perhaps to look for causes in the constitution of the teaching staff, at the inception of the colleges recruited among secondary and primary school teachers, some of who did an MEd in Boston; others recruited as assistant teachers from the main university towns of Lisboa and Coimbra among those equipped for an academic life, but who had not found working placements in universities. These probably saw in the polytechnics the second best option for an academic professional life. The first group was willing, while the second reluctant, towards what was seen as the 'new' project of the teacher training colleges. Both groups of teachers recognize their cultural and academic indebtedness to the universities where they graduated and post-graduated. Thus, there was a certain acceptance for some years (the first), of the role of subordinated satellite of the universities, when these desired it, since whenever possible the polytechnic teachers would jump to university placements. Consequently, there was no trying to do something innovative, in institutional terms, due to a close dependence on university models and roles.

The problem was there were hardly ever any negotiations, only a reluctant "colonization" accepted by the universities so long as two conditions were maintained - they belonged the undisputed knowledges and expertise; they were the "governors" of the polytechnic teachers'

careers; they were the first rate teachers and the others were necessarily second-rate, the ones they had turned down. The mentality at the university was and is still overwhelmingly colonial and authoritative; It is characterised by an absence of rigorous knowledge of what the schools of education and the polytechnics are and do; and by a proud rejection of what they do not know, neither want to.

There is no point in denying, however, that there is considerable cultural self-doubt in the polytechnic colleges; but there are also important recognitions to be made of them as places where new research areas have constituted themselves, eg children's literature, exemplar in the cultural studies tradition, multi-disciplinary in approach, articulating the insights and knowledge of literary studies, psychology, sociology, history, reading and writing. And where a coming together of various disciplinary knowledges in a relatively cosy spatial arrangement is feasible, despite the few resources, and the fact that research is neither funded nor given priority (from the inside or from outside). Research depended and still does, to a certain extent, on the extra work and self funding of researchers, which is further aggravated by the fact that there are no traditions; only models acquired by the polytechnic teachers as they pursue their careers at the universities and which they try to adapt to the ESE's realities. As they are places where teachers from various fields of study and research traditions come in close contact, most of the times the models of academic research are plural, antagonistic and dialoguing. This means, in practical terms, that there never is an "academy" in an ESE, for one person's research can seldom be legitimised by the others. The "intellectual coherence" in the midst of such diversity and of so many academic discourses, some more scientifically oriented and others pedagogically, is imperative, but extremely difficult to negotiate, for it implies the emergence of a higher education culture which contests the authority and leadership of the university model.

III

Having pointed to the main preoccupations of this paper, the third part will be of a theoretical and methodological nature. It will be based on a metaphor of the high and the low for the university/polytechnic contention, and it will depart from the high and the low as cultural symbolic categories, since they are so deeply rooted in western European mappings of society and culture (Stallybrass and White, 1988) to argue representations of a "minority high culture" threatened by commercialization and massification; of the canon against multi-culturalism; as well as of the literary versus cultural studies argument which is specific to the humanities.

Lyotard's (1989, 15) working proposition in the first chapter of *La Condition Postmoderne* - that knowledge changes its status when societies enter the post-industrial stage and cultures enter the post-modern - hovers in the background of what I see as the needs of higher education in Portugal to adapt to the new technological conditions in terms of research paradigms and of the definition of *which* knowledge to transmit. Lyotard's thesis that since knowledge no longer combines with the individual's spiritual formation (*Bildung*), it has become not an end in itself, but a commodity to be exchanged and sold, is central to the new understandings of higher education (and in particular teacher training) I wish to forward. Lyotard consequently declares his preference for the fine arts against mass culture (1986), a position I do not subscribe to, preferring to retain his implication that it is urgent to rethink the role of education in contemporary (post) industrial societies. For me, the central question is: **Should we lament the loss of a European cultural tradition and stand against it? Is there a point in enforcing the distance between Europe and the rest of the world or between an unchanging canon and very visible new cultural forms such as the media and mass or popular culture?**

Cornel West (1993) characterises our times as those in which the European models of high culture, of culture in the Arnoldian sense of “the best that has been thought and said in the world” have been displaced, just as Europe has ceased to be viewed as the universal subject of culture; not that the world is new, nor are there any radically new configurations in the life we live. Some argue that what has happened is that history as it used to be known, from an eurocentric, western, male, racist and sexist point of view is being challenged (Chambers quoted in Chen, 1996a, 310). However foreign we are to the massive growth of cultural industries and to cultural struggles, everyone of us must have noticed the proliferation of new histories we have been offered as diversifications from the “great political acts of history” (Appleby et alii, 1994): regional history, postcolonial history, personal history, “the history of women’s struggle, the history of youth culture, the history of prisons, the history of madness, the history of working classes, the history of minorities, the history of the Third World” (Baudrillard quoted in Chen, 1996a). The dominant or hegemonic position which once belonged to western Europe has been taken by the United States as a world power and the cultural centre, where we have seen high culture losing ground to “mainstream popular culture, toward everyday practices and local narratives” (Hall, 1996, 465). There are, so far, no grand or master counter-narratives, rather a seizing of several cultural productions and circulations which used to be marginal. These do not represent a large-scale re(analysis); rather a shift of perspective, of rewriting the past and the present from alternative standpoints, most of the times from resistant, dominated or silenced positions, though the strategy may imply, as Chen (1996, 312) argues, to silence dominant discourses, so that “minor noises” can finally be heard and listened to (Chen, 1996, note 3, 323). High culture was always notorious in excluding and suppressing differences.

The interesting part of this argument is that the opposition of the traditional academics has kept these new narratives of the low culturally marginal, not allowing them to be de-marginalised, so that what we are witnessing is an unprecedented cultural fragmentation which is menacing the centre but defining itself against a centre which it needs to maintain as a core against which to rebel. Nowadays it has become particularly hard to say what is culturally central and culturally marginal and this whole state of affairs bears reflections on how we teach and learn, explaining perhaps how student-sensitive we have become, despite massification of students in higher education; why we feel our students do not meet our expectations in academic terms; why more and more teachers have selectively appropriated and rearticulated the western canons and curricula and searched for approximation to local experience, regional culture, popular and populist tastes.

Peter Stallybrass and Allon White in *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* explain this opposition of the high and the low with resort to Bakhtine’s idea of the carnivalesque - the temporary licensed suspension of the order, where the low becomes high, where value is inverted and the high vs low distinction ceases to exist, where cultural hierarchies and canon formations are dismantled. For the high desires the low, the site of the repressed other, which exerts a powerful fascination and appeal. Two ways seem to emerge from this theoretical framework as to the fortunes of high and low culture: either one abandons the distinction between the high and the low, or the high and the low have to be worked out hierarchically in articulation, but also as arbitrarily set categories, necessary for the identification of each other. Where to set the boundaries between the one and the other becomes an “exercise in cultural regulation”, a play of power, which dismantles the canonic (Hall, 1996). In “Notes on Deconstructing the Popular” Stuart Hall (1994, 460-1) attempts to explain the various meanings of the popular either as “the commercial” or “massification”, or in the antropological sense of all that people do, as structured in principle by the opposition to dominant or elite culture and thus as always situated in the periphery. He values these tensions which organize a resistance to the hegemonic, for he sees the polarization of the high and the low organized around the people vs the power bloc. It is the task of educational and cultural institutions, in his opinion, to “discipline and police (the)

boundary" of the cultural relations between the high and the low, deciding in each period and place what is to be incorporated. Through readings of Stallybrass and White, Hall defends the interrelationship of the high and the low, and the necessity of a hierarchical principle in culture, wishing to see the dichotomy of the high and the low in the Derridarean sense.

But this dichotomy is still often discussed in the context of, and with reference to the popular. Colin McCabe (1986) concludes that the dichotomy should be abandoned in the sense of ignoring it, and his reasons open up space for those of Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, who defends that "popular cultural forms have moved so far towards centre-stage in British cultural life that the separate existence of a distinctive popular culture in oppositional relation to high culture is now in question". The choice is between saying that there is "one culture (albeit with divisions in it) or several cultures (overlapping and rubbing up against each other), but no longer that there are two cultures, high and popular, divided from each other (quoted in Webster, 1996, 541-2). He further suggests that there is "one (multiply divided) culture" with the dominant forms being those "traditionally designated as popular". This position, which is partly shared by Dick Hebdige, emphasizes the predominance of the popular and the low as central and national. Giroux (1994, 45) takes this view further by contending that the great influential pedagogical forces of the twenty-first century will not be the teachers in the public school system, but the cultural agents in advertising, radio talk-shows, the malls and the cinema complexes; that cultural hegemony will belong to television, film and the electronic media.

To address the unspoken, and the so far voiceless against mainstream discourses has become of paramount importance in the wars now raging. Why not adhere to the Arnoldian "best that has been thought and spoken in the world", ask the conservative, so that sweetness and light will inundate all? This position is counter-argued with the fact that the best is but a political and discriminatory selection operated by the dominant powers, whose predominant model is the top-down authoritative discourse: the enlightened condescending to speak to those living in darkness. *They* have built a monolithic culture which *they* have offered as *our* "common culture", in a tradition which stands arrogantly against the multiculturalist proposition of reading society's mainstream tradition and simultaneously reading it 'against the grain', against predominant constructions of it, within that which constitutes possible discourses in the cultural formations and practices of a time and a place. The recurrent pattern of high/low culture has been exposed as the prestigious high wishing to eliminate the low, but fails to understand how much of its status depends on the low and how much of it includes the low symbolically (as other), which is what Stuart Hall has called the "dialogic understanding of popular culture".

The wars between the high and the low will continue to be felt in relation to the popular, to the academic canon, and to several other categorisations. What I wish to emphasize is how the academic terrain has been so revolved lately that the culture wars seem to have redefined themselves from which knowledge - scientific? or humanistic? - to what kind of practices and implications the several knowledges imply or seem to "naturally" determine, to scisms inside each of the former "cultures", questionings which undermine the limits, the known paradigms, the practices. To deconstruct the myths of our times was the note of suspicion sounded by Barthes and Foucault back in the seventies which is keeping us busy. In a world of competing truths and ideologies and discursive forms of any kind of academic knowledge the forms through which we teach and learn any subject are slowly becoming more important or as important as the content itself of any subject. More and more we all have become aware of how vital it is to use the word, how language carries us away with not quite intended meanings, how language precedes and determines the "truths" we just grew accustomed to accept, and lately also to defy.

Worse still, we all have been led to understand that once there was one, untainted and homogeneous culture, which is not there anymore, or the certainties and models of which do not appease us anymore. It was part of an imperialist dream of colonization, of a higher western civilization in conquest of the rest of the world. Some of us choose to believe in that comfortable world picture still, others succumb easily to the end of the century nightmares of total disruption and fragmentation; others still sort out alternative ways out of both dead ends.

The culture wars now raging are not exclusive to the academic milieu as it would wish. It includes wider arenas of policy-making and of cultural production and commercialization, which do indeed affect the former's hegemony. There is talk of the decline of the university (meaning higher education), because it does not meet the old standards, but also because it knew not how to adapt to the new challenges of a technological world, characterized by a profound historical and political disintegration, announced by Foucault, Fredric Jameson, Derrida, Lacan, Lyotard; by the new communication technologies; by "feminism, molecular and micropolitics, the autonomy movement, the counterculture, the politics of sexuality, the politics of utterance (who says what, how, to whom, on whose behalf)" in Dick Hebdige's words (1996,180).

Are the academics involved with low culture, with the popular and with multiculturalism just paying lip service to sales figures? (Firth and Savage in McRobbie,1996,253), are they capitulating to existing cultural industries, or are they creating transitional discourses to accommodate other times and diverse sensibilities, which imply a rethinking of the higher education subjects and learning cultures? I hope I have shown the latter to be the case and that it will lead the Teacher Training Colleges to step outside the exclusive academies (the high) to connect with the real and commodified world, to build on the professional link between new concepts and theoretical language and the world outside the academy, ruled by economic laws, by the media technologies, by a rhetoric of images and surfaces, commodification and pleasure, in sum, the low. The catch word would be inclusion, not negation of the high or the low, in order to create an alternative agenda for the *other* of higher education.

Notes

(1) As to one of these new articulations, see Michael Schudson (1994), who argues that one of the roles of the university must be to add refinement and sophistication to the everyday interpretations students do of some objects of culture, in order to make them more critical. His general argument is that the high and the low culture debate in the academy has lost its centrality since, eg. in literary theory, the art object has ceased to be valued for its intrinsic qualities and started being studied as to its reception and consumption, which has thrown the reader, the critic, the evaluator and the consumer to the front.

(2) Susane Scaffè (1989, 20/1), for example, defines academic culture as being "a common code expressing the same images, idioms, metaphors and particular rule-governed systems of thought, different in their individual expression but not in their essential structure". She is evoking a question of race and of youth resistance culture which does not apply to the case in Castelo Branco. One has to see their appropriation of rituals and chants as a "simulacrum" of university life.

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