

## Cultural Studies in Portugal: The Present Scenario<sup>1</sup>

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In this paper I discuss the situation of cultural studies in Portugal by looking into its presence in Portuguese universities and research centres, especially through their master and doctoral programmes. My results suggest that cultural studies is experiencing a fast academic expansion. Yet, the name ‘cultural studies’ continues to cause unease in some academic quarters (namely, in literary studies) and there is ambiguity regarding what is meant by it. My results also suggest that the current expansion of cultural studies in the academia is entangled with top-down institutional changes, closely related to the Bologna process and the growing importance of the cultural industries, as part of a more general shift to the ‘new economy’.

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## CULTURAL STUDIES IN PORTUGAL: THE PRESENT SCENARIO

It is not easy to describe the present situation of cultural studies in Portugal. To start with, there is no Portuguese Cultural Studies Association, which might provide us with some hard facts concerning, for instance, the number of members (an index of how many people actively identify with this practice), its founding moment (which would give us an idea of when and under which circumstances cultural studies – or its naming – became important) or the record of past and present activities (always a good indicator of what is going on in the field). Furthermore, there are no regular publications overtly committed to cultural studies topics or a cultural studies approach. On the whole, it is difficult to say how many people are doing cultural studies in Portugal today and how this is being done; even more difficult is to establish whether it makes sense to speak of a *Portuguese* Cultural Studies, a question far too complex to address in this short overview.<sup>2</sup>

What is beyond doubt is that Portugal has not remained immune to the cultural studies' 'success story' of the nineties. The ideas and theoretical framework that informed the debates on culture and power in the Anglo-American world have found their way into the Portuguese academia. As in other regions (such as Scandinavia), cultural studies came in tow with the growing attention that popular culture, youth culture and the media started to receive within the social sciences. Its appearance in the humanities was more controversial: cultural studies' trademark attack on the canon, together with its challenge of disciplinary boundaries, met with resistance in more traditional quarters, namely literary studies. English and American departments (perhaps for linguistic reasons) were probably the first to take an interest in it – one of the pioneers of cultural studies in Portugal was Professor Álvaro Pina, based in the English Department of the Faculty of Letters of the University of Lisbon.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, the debate also reached Portuguese (Silvestre, 1999) and German departments (Sanches, 1999),<sup>4</sup> eventually impacting on Classical and Romance literature departments, as the recent changes that have taken place in the Faculties of Letters of the Universities of Coimbra and Porto suggest.<sup>5</sup>

A glimpse at the master and doctoral programmes currently on offer in Portuguese universities leads one to conclude that cultural studies is on the rise. 2010 saw the launching of two doctoral programmes in this area: one of them, announced on the official web site as the 'first doctoral programme in cultural studies in Portugal', is being jointly ministered by the Universities of Aveiro and Minho (two younger state universities located in the north); the other is

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offered by a private college, the Faculty of Human Sciences of the Portuguese Catholic University, based in Lisbon, as part of a vaster inter-institutional programme called ‘the Lisbon Consortium’. Both programmes represent an effort to bring together research interests that are common to the humanities and the social sciences, especially around the topic of communication.<sup>6</sup>

This interdisciplinary leaning has been felt in other postgraduate and research programmes, even in the humanities, proving favourable to the implementation of cultural studies: as part of its M.A. programme in Anglo-American Studies, the University of Porto now offers courses in cultural studies, inter-art studies and women studies; the Centre for Comparative Studies of the Faculty of Letters of the University of Lisbon (in fact, a centre for research in comparative literature) actively endorses interdisciplinarity, as reflected in its major areas that range from intercultural studies to European literary and cultural studies and inter-semiotic or ‘inter-art’ studies. Finally – to finish this short review – since 2010 the Faculty of Letters of the University of Coimbra has been offering an M.A. and a PhD in Feminist Studies – the only programme of the kind in Portugal – as well as a doctoral programme in the ‘materialities of literature’. Both programmes are still very much literature-oriented; however, the former – taught in association with the Centre for Social Studies (CES), an internationally reputed research centre directed by sociologist Boaventura Sousa Santos – is also described as ‘interdepartmental’ and accepts students from all academic backgrounds (including the social sciences). As for the latter, it proposes to study literature vis-à-vis the new technologies of communication and the other arts, stating as its ultimate aim to contribute to the renovation of literary studies in Portugal as part of ‘the larger project of rethinking the Humanities in the era of new media’. According to the programme, students are expected ‘to develop skills and research methods associated to the scientific domains of theory of literature, cultural studies, interart studies, digital humanities, and other emerging fields’.<sup>7</sup>

The Bologna accords – a document signed in 1999 that laid the foundations for the creation of a common European Higher Education Area – has no doubt played an important role in this ‘interdisciplinary turn’. The pressures to comply with the Bologna guidelines, which encourage a more flexible curriculum – one that allows students to customise their education and become more mobile within the European zone – have made the engagement with cultural studies a somehow natural, if not inevitable, thing (indeed, most of the new programmes acknowledge Bologna).<sup>8</sup> A second factor that could help explain this sudden institutional interest in cultural studies is the growing concern with the cultural industries, as part of a more general shift to the ‘new economy’. The idea that culture, through the cultural indus-

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<sup>7</sup> In Coimbra, following the Bologna-oriented reorganization of 2007, the new Department of Languages, Literatures and Cultures (which brings together people doing Classical, Romance, Anglo-American and Germanic studies) now offers an M.A. in Literary and Cultural Studies (basically, a comparative literature programme). Similarly, since 2007, the Department of Portuguese and Romance Studies of the Faculty of Letters of the University of Porto offers an M.A. in ‘Literary and Cultural Studies and Inter-arts’, which merges previously separate M.A. programmes in literature. For more details, see ‘Relatório da concretização do processo de Bolonha, anos lectivos de 2006/2007 e 2007/2008’, [http://sigarra.up.pt/flup/web\\_gessi\\_docs.download\\_file?p\\_name=F12785065/Relatorio\\_Bolonha\\_FLUP20092.pdf](http://sigarra.up.pt/flup/web_gessi_docs.download_file?p_name=F12785065/Relatorio_Bolonha_FLUP20092.pdf) (retrieved 19/05/2011), p. 12.

<sup>8</sup> The former programme is a partnership between the Communication and Society Research Centre (CECS) of the University of Minho and the Department of Languages and Cultures of the University of Aveiro; the latter is associated with the Centre for the Study of Culture and Communication (CECC) of the Catholic University.

tries, holds the key to the country's economic problems shapes the two doctoral programmes in cultural studies analysed above (namely, the one jointly run by the Universities of Aveiro and Minho and the one run by the Catholic University). Both programmes mention the cultural industries: the former promises to 'produce' professionals in the areas of 'cultural creation, cultural promotion, cultural animation, cultural mediation and cultural dissemination', its main objective being to turn out qualified professionals to work in public libraries, book publishing, the production of information and cultural events, cultural associations, embassies, institutes, foundations, cultural centres and the like.<sup>9</sup> The latter could not be any clearer about its commitment to interact with the 'cultural economy', which it describes, in the brochure of the Lisbon Consortium, as a growing economic sector already responsible for 2.5% of employment in Portugal.<sup>10</sup> This programme is specifically designed to provide qualifications in the areas of cultural programming and management. Its incorporation in the 'Lisbon Consortium', alongside key elite institutions like the National Theatre Museum, the Portuguese Film Institute, the National Cultural Centre, the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, the Culturgest and the Lisbon Municipal Council<sup>11</sup>, certainly places it in a strong position to achieve that goal.

It would seem that the current expansion of cultural studies in Portugal is more to do with top-down institutional changes (one could even speak of a general favourable 'mood') than with overt academic confrontations that lend credence to cultural studies' international reputation as an intellectual practice with a critical/ political edge. Nevertheless, the name 'cultural studies' continues to cause some unease in certain circles. This is the case of the Catholic University, which refers to cultural studies, in the Portuguese version of its promotional material, as *estudos de cultura* ('studies of culture') rather than *estudos culturais*.<sup>12</sup> This could be a matter of translation option, but the syllabi of some of the courses included in this doctoral programme do point to an understanding of culture that falls in line with the Kulturkritik tradition, in Francis Mulhern's terminology (2000), rather than the theoretical work that has been at the core of the cultural studies project.<sup>13</sup>

To conclude, cultural studies seems to be experiencing a rise in the Portuguese academia; furthermore, this success story is being largely built at an institutional level. In practice, this means that a growing number of students and researchers have now a place where they can do

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<sup>9</sup> For the programme in Feminist Studies, see: [www.uc.pt/fluc/depllc/Cursos/3cic/EF/](http://www.uc.pt/fluc/depllc/Cursos/3cic/EF/) (last accessed 29/08/2011). For the 'materialities of literature' programme, see [www.uc.pt/fluc/depllc/Cursos/3cic/ML](http://www.uc.pt/fluc/depllc/Cursos/3cic/ML) (last accessed 29/08/2011).

<sup>10</sup> In practice, the reforms carried out in Bologna's name have also meant the streamlining of higher education to accommodate market-oriented goals, hence the mixed feelings these reforms are likely to arise among cultural studies scholars.

<sup>11</sup> See the English brochure of the Lisbon Consortium: [www.fch.lisboa.ucp.pt/resources/Documentos/brochuras\\_cursos/FCH\\_Consortium\\_brochura\\_FEV11.pdf](http://www.fch.lisboa.ucp.pt/resources/Documentos/brochuras_cursos/FCH_Consortium_brochura_FEV11.pdf), especially p. 3. The Portuguese version can be accessed at: [www.fch.lisboa.ucp.pt/resources/Documentos/brochuras\\_cursos/Brochura\\_Consortium\\_Portugu%C3%AAs.pdf](http://www.fch.lisboa.ucp.pt/resources/Documentos/brochuras_cursos/Brochura_Consortium_Portugu%C3%AAs.pdf) (retrieved 18/05/2011).

<sup>12</sup> The National Cultural Centre is a cultural society founded in 1945; the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation is the longest-running private Foundation in Portugal (it is also one of the most active, especially in the arts). Finally, the Culturgest is the cultural branch of Portugal's biggest bank – still state-owned at the time of writing, but probably not for long.

<sup>13</sup> Interestingly, the Catholic University opted for the use of 'studies of culture' instead of 'cultural studies' at this year's conference of the Portuguese Association of Anglo-American Studies (APEAA). While featuring in the international brochure of the Lisbon Consortium, the term 'cultural studies' is nevertheless deemed inappropriate in another English-speaking (but now national) context. This brief example brings home to us cultural studies' national and international power entanglements.

cultural studies – even if not exactly under the same label or meaning exactly the same thing to everyone. There certainly is a positive side to this ambiguity, which may allow different kinds of valuable work to be done. Yet, there is also the risk of cultural studies losing its critical edge. One of cultural studies’ original strengths was its ability to engage with the ‘here-and-now’ and establish meaningful connections between apparently disconnected things (such as culture and society or knowledge and power). Faced with an acute economic crisis and a programme of extensive public cuts (in line with the recent IMF-EU-ECB intervention), Portugal is now experiencing a moment of fast change. Among other things, a new culture-power alignment seems to be emerging. There is no lack of research topics, concerning, for instance the new orthodoxies formed around the ‘cultural industries’ and the ‘new economy’ (cf. Oakley, 2004; Miller, 2004); the relationship between national and transnational cultural studies projects (or even between cultural studies and other intellectual movements); the apparent conversion, in some academic quarters, of cultural studies into ‘intercultural studies’, and so on.<sup>14</sup> These are times of intellectual confusion, which call for more critical thinking. Whether cultural studies will become an actor in such an intellectual endeavour remains to be seen. This will certainly depend on our ability – as cultural studies practitioners – to understand the national, local and institutional conditions of our own practice.

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<sup>14</sup> In Portugal, this trend is especially evident in the Centre for Intercultural Studies (CEI), based in ISCAP, Porto. Their research interests include: intercultural representations (with a focus on literature and cinema), comparative law across cultures, intercultural communication, translation studies, cultural tourism, travelogues and gender studies. See their website at: <http://www.iscap.ipp.pt/~cei/english.htm> (last accessed 10/09/2011).