

Editorial

“Science is no longer aimed at helping us understand the universe and ourselves”. This statement, of a radical pessimism, has recently been uttered by the respectable voice of one of our greatest representatives of contemporary research in the field of History and Social Science both in Portugal and at international level. At stake is Vitorino Magalhães Godinho¹ whose statement can't help being regarded as a source of perplexity and questioning by the scientific community. What's the purpose of science, then? What's the true meaning of the rhetoric of government circles on the importance of investment in research? Vitorino Magalhães Godinho also forwards an explanation which I suspect might justify this disturbing situation we are living in: according to him, the powerful have deliberately decided that “all that matters is profit” and consequently “nowadays economy sets the agenda of scientific research (...) research centers are above all linked to powerful industries namely in the pharmaceutical and armament sectors. Hypertrophy of technology does not develop science, it rather subordinates science”.

This is not an isolated voice. One month before, the historian José Mattoso, one of our most outstanding contemporary social scientists, had already announced his retirement from scientific activity² and in the recognition ceremony held on his behalf he declared he did not understand the reasons for “having abandoned human and social sciences to their fate, keeping them in or pushing them into a situation of inferiority”, which is reflected in “mediocre and useless” research. This is the context that

throws some light into other critical positions, such as those who have been denouncing, for example, “the murder of philosophy”.

Simultaneously with these critical positions, which some will probably regard as out of date, a seminar took place in the Portuguese Council of Education³, where the future of research and Universities has been discussed in the light of a “change of paradigm”. According to the minister in charge of this sector, the European process for the production of “Universities of excellence” should get closer to the American model, where Universities discuss their curricula with labour market players. The “American model” is the perfect illustration of the “new paradigm”, as declared by a recent minister of education of a socialist government (genuinely socialist as can be seen...), in whose words governments do no longer regard higher education as a public good which is reflected in public Universities' budgets, where only 7 to 20% are covered by the state budget. The remainder is self generated income, that is, I should add, private funding, or rather, a clear demonstration and affirmation of the vitality and potential of the so-called “civil society”, a recurrent euphemism to avoid more “striking” and “archaic” expressions... Capitalism has never existed.

However, the logic of the triumphant (liberal, statelike, or “post-industrial”) capitalism from the beginning of the industrial revolution is precisely what has transformed everything that used to be important — to understand the world — into something useless. The relationship between use value

and exchange value becomes inversely proportional. Besides, the triumph and imposition of this type of rationale explains what the Brazilian social scientist, Celso Furtado⁴, meant by the “inherent insanity of our society” in a fabulous, therefore ignored, essay (p. 167). In his preface to this work, Celso Furtado classifies his book as an “antiacademic book”. He defends the thesis that the history of industrial civilization (in both its “western” or “soviet” variants) has to be envisaged as a process of “progressive subordination of all forms of creative activity to an instrumental rationale” (p. 83). The concept of progress, mistaken with a process of wealth accumulation through commodity production, can only be measured by increases in the productivity of human work. In this perspective, all the different forms of human creativity tend to be placed at the service of the accumulation process, but “those whose outcomes are inherently cumulative — science and technology — are the ones that most meet the requirements of such a process” “(...) without the subordination of science and technology to the accumulation process, it would never have reached its characterizing intensity” (p. 86). The inexorable character of progress and the dehumanization of human beings in industrial society can then be seen as two faces of the same coin.

Back to the beginning of this text, this is the context that opposes skeptical perspectives of some researchers like Vitorino de Magalhães Godinho or José Mattoso to a realistic vision of present Portuguese society and (repeating the mediocre and recurrent dominant rhetoric) of how to face the challenges posed by our insertion in a globalized world ruled by market and knowledge. No doubt these wise people and technicians that rule over us are unequivocally realistic people. Believing in a recent best-seller, whose success will surely contribute to

GDP growth, we might even think we have the privilege of being governed by a “golden lad”.

However, there is another sort of people who do not deny the principle of *reality* but rather guide themselves by the principle of *possibility*. According to Robert Musil⁵, the principle of possibility consists of regarding things not just as they are but as they could be, which means having the “capacity to forward everything that can also be and not to give more importance to what it is than to what it is not”. This is a characteristic of so-called dreamers, idealists, romantics, fools, visionaries, lunatics. To sum up, the men “with no qualities” we are so badly in need of.

ENDNOTES

1. Interview to Vitorino Magalhães Godinho, conducted by Maria João Martins, published in *JL, Jornal de Letras Artes e Ideias*, 18th June 2008, p. 13.

2. Cf: Newspaper *Público*, 17th May 2008, p. 11 (by Carlos Dias).

3. Cf: Newspaper *Público*, 24th June 2008, p. 8 (by Bárbara Wong).

4. FURTADO, Celso (1978). *Criatividade e dependência na civilização industrial*. Rio de Janeiro: Paz e Terra.

5. MUSIL, Robert (2008). *O homem sem qualidades*. Vol.1. Lisboa: Dom Quixote (translated by João Barrento).

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