

## Editorial

### Governments and the language of government.

#### Brief archaeological notes for intense times such as the untried assessment bureaucracy

I like to define myself as a historian of the present, a position in which, thanks to some colleagues of mine, I feel I am in the best of company. My analytical observations focus on the historical-educational landscapes that for many are definitively surpassed-buried but which in my view, to the contrary, seem entirely familiar today. The finer points and details of bygone times lend me, in their primordial entirety, a technology of government – a talking-doing – whose structural strength seems to explain and mould more appropriately to our personal and collective identity than revolutions, different political solutions, continuous educational reforms and other innovations which the omnipotent clamour for change of our agendas brings about. Presentism, commonly tied in with an automatic desire for change, leads us however to an almost childish lack of knowledge of the rules and mechanisms that make any form of power exist. It is precisely because we know nothing of its nature that we are swiftly led to imagine that it could be something completely different. One only underestimates what one does not know.

My first hypothesis is that the construction of the nation-State is characterised by the permanent intention to govern without governing, in other words, to amplify government to its most distant limits, to the choices of the autonomous subjects in its decisions. In these terms, power should not be viewed as property, something which is owned, but essentially as a perpetually re-worked composition. With regard to its functioning, we should value

circulation, dissemination, networks, consumption, and never ever, possession. Since the 18<sup>th</sup> century the domain of government has been increasingly less about universal systems of injunction or prohibition, and more about a framework of regulated liberty. To put it another way, each singularity, each one of us, is now seen and constructed as a point of passage subjected to principles and forces of power. Another central issue when tackling power is linked to the regimes of intelligibility, of an action that is carried out in accordance with a certain description.

My second hypothesis is, hence, that it is always a problem of language that is at the origin and at the constitution of the social world. The zones of government are increasingly intertwined with intellectual operations and circulation of scientific discourses liable to reflect a mass of phenomena. The population as a whole is now the object of knowledge, clamouring for the presence of new specialists. The State can be seen producing and sophisticating legislation, statistics, indices, charts, tables, etc, aimed at, simultaneously, explaining and shaping the functioning of the economy and society. I am talking about the entire regime of announcement which, in the name of a rational knowledge, has enabled the different authorities, public and private, to claim the possibility of their government of men and things. I consider therefore that any social practice does not exist outside the words that are used in each epoch to describe it. It is as if reality and representation are undistinguishable, and the destination of the collectives and individuals is entirely played

out in the circulation, appropriation and manipulation of common vocabulary.

As a historian of education I have worked on a historical phase that coincides with the institutionalisation of the model of secondary education with modern characteristics and which was, as had to be the case, matched by an authentic explosion in documents, a time curve that runs from the last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century. I shall briefly explain. At the end of the eighteenth century a positive body of knowledge began to take shape about school culture that brought together a very wide-ranging set of actors: representatives from central administration, headmasters, politicians, pedagogues, psychologists, doctors, hygienists. This conglomerate of practitioners and experts managed, bit by bit, and in a campaign of universalisation of their vision about the problems and solutions, to impose themselves throughout the first quarter of the nineteenth century both socially and within the political power: several went to public institutions which welcomed them or were even created to enable the studies and experimental research carried out on teaching and education for all. Thus, somewhat naturally, they also made inroads into the secondary school and conditions were formally created for them to work alongside the school administrators and teachers.

The secondary school landscape from the dawn of the 1930s is, in effect, made up of headmasters, teachers, doctors, school nurses and psychologists. It was in this background that an integrated policy of government began to be structured, rationalising the movement and distribution of the school population in the national territory, also making individualised teaching and therapeutic work geared towards the body and the soul of each adolescent feasible. This complex task only took place because all these educators put the process into writing on a regular basis. Each one of them, now with the status of a public sector employee, had to communicate to their superiors, and often several times a year, the work they were carrying out and the results they had consequently obtained in the Portuguese secondary schools. Furthermore, the map of day-to-day relations was established based on the official circular, for which the central authorities demanded specific data about the guidance and execution of educational

policies. They all, therefore, became speakers of a common pedagogical language, using compatible indicators, supplied by the political power, which in turn had incorporated and were universalising the models of analysis that those same social scientists had constituted for themselves in their laboratories of origin. Also here a story of powers made compatible unfolds: instead of a linear domination, what we have are networks of actors, translating and adapting common concepts. The archives underwent, therefore, exponential growth, with thousands of reports and quantitative and qualitative information of all kinds. In relation to earlier decades, one could say there was a different school reality: the questions, statistical headings and indicators used to make education-learning intelligible – the teacher's work and the pupil's universe – did not cease to increase, completely exceeding any situation previously presented. The ambition to map the educational reality did not appear to have restrictions or limits. Successive educational authorities, every time they thought about modes of objectivation of the policies they pursued, ordered their public employees to draw up an informative report in which their action was described as entirely in compliance. This had been the case earlier in the time of the Marquis de Pombal and would continue to be so for decades. Notwithstanding, with the administrative sophistication and growth of secondary schooling, from 1895 onwards there would be an authentic inflation in the forms of consultation and requests for information from the local educational agents about both the means and the situation of teaching as regards the idiosyncratic traits of each student.

All these texts seem to me less products from authors, and rather a certain unity of writings; it was this writing, indeed, which enabled the contradictions to be overcome and various texts to be connected to one another in series. All these actors-creators found themselves in a transdiscursive position, linked to certain forms of announcement. Their reports cannot therefore be interpreted to the letter, as if the sum of the multiple indicators used to describe the secondary school and the respective pupils constituted a faithful portrait of these realities. These texts are actually something different: a tool of production of educational policies and an exercise of construction of identical bonds in the

whole of the national territory. I shall refer concisely herein, for reasons of space, only to headmasters and teachers. The headmaster was submitted to a disciplinary routine that demanded a huge amount of initiative. He was responsible for describing what went on in the secondary school. Having to write more and more. The head of the teaching establishment was also associated with a discursive regime, with its own rules of functioning. Of course, the historian is obliged, before presenting the territories that are also configured here, to try and identify what this function of reporting corresponded to. João Barroso felt the need to draw up an annual report on the situation of education and the various teaching activities as a way of showing how secondary schools had taken on board the rules and guidelines in force.

This conclusion derived from the fact that the document had been written in accordance with the increasingly more detailed and wide-ranging indicators. This means that the head of the secondary school also strove for a kind of power that forced the common actors to narrate, precisely and truthfully, the realities that the hierarchy wished to see actually occurring. In this case, the headmaster described creatively the ways through which the institution he managed had been able to comply with the programmes and aims established by the central administration in each academic year. Once this conformity had been presented, he could then move on to his own ideas, proposals, criticisms and even complaints.

The very important fact that this discursive text, as we will see below, was not addressed to any one person in particular – it was sent to the General Management but could also be printed and circulated as a simple periodic publication – lent the headmaster an area of ambivalence: his discourse would have an internal and external visibility, and it was up to him to decide which descriptions, opinions and oppositions should be highlighted and which should be downplayed. In the midst of the New State, the director-general of Secondary Education, António Augusto Pires de Lima, in a circular and a notice, respectively in 1935 and 1938, outlined the guidelines governing the writing of the new models of reports by the headmasters. The vision was a map whose regions would supply a complete picture of the state of the secondary school and its population.

It was, in the first place, to take further the intention expressed in 1918 to associate the writing of the report to other figures of the secondary school. In the 1930s it was again advocated that the headmaster, in order to draw up the annual report, should base it not only on his “own observation” but also on other reports produced by the class directors, caretakers, school doctors, presidents of exam panels; as well as these, there were “services” (“school, cinema, canteen, assistance associations, etc”) which produced their “special reports”. The headmaster’s task would consist of, therefore, “a comparative study and summary”, enclosing all the documents that the institution had produced.

The political effect of this entire discursive scenario was clear: the necessity to record a wide-ranging set of practices involving all the parties meant that they existed to be registered. As if the very reality of each secondary school found its own framework in the indicators defined at a higher hierarchical level. Secondly it was argued that the descriptive part of the report – outlining, for example, the breakdown of the teaching service, timetables or test and exam statistics – must not dispense with the “respective tables” and charts which should be numbered and cited in the text. All the information would have a second quantitative reading systematised into graphs making for immediate understanding.

Finally, there was the argument of unification. The whole of this huge documental body should be organised and presented so that its items could be “compared among one another and studied in conjunction by the headmaster”. In these terms, the gathering of data and the plan to write the reports should “strictly comply with the rules of the Ministry, with regard to the content and respective ordering”. The justification given at the time was that, with standardised information the central services could make the “necessary comparative study among the various establishments”, and draw up what would be the “overall report of the secondary schools”. Of course, this never came to be produced. In the 1930s the report written showed above all that it was a micro-physical action instrument. Furthermore, a growing set of official circulars called for the headmasters to gather and systematise wide-ranging information both about the school population and about the teaching situation.

Between 19 January 1935 and 22 September 1955 the General Management of Secondary Schooling sent exactly 2000 circulars to the headmasters, with a significant proportion of them made up of requests for clarifications and information. The function of narrator became confused with the very composition of the role of the headmaster.

The same kind of thinking has characterised the teachers' situation from the very beginning. The oldest demand of this nature is contained in the National Secondary Schools Regulation of 1873, signed by Rodrigues Sampaio. Among the "duties" that were assigned is the drawing up of "one report each year" about "the method that was implemented in the teaching, the application of the programme, difficulties that were found in this application, progress of the study teachers are accountable for", as well as other information about the "advance and instruction of the pupils" (Decree no. 31/3/1873).

This very same year, the advisor, Jaime Moniz, then exercising the role of director-general of Public Instruction, dispatched a circular to the secondary schools in which he noted the "omission" of many teachers in complying with the aforementioned regulatory stipulation. He believed that the "methods" and "results", reported by those who were endowed with the "intelligence versed in the practice of lessons [and] used to working with the different aptitudes of the pupils", indeed constituted "precious and always indispensable data" for the senior staff who made decisions about public instruction. The Government, "demanding the information requested" from the teachers, also expected natural "solicitude" and could not tolerate any non-compliance. The director-general went on to analyse the sparse collection he had managed to bring together. His analyses revealed an understanding that this discursive text could be a tool for comparison and standardisation of the teaching practices. The rest of the Circular, which actually comprised most of the text, was taken advantage of by the director-general to lay down the indispensable aspects of the teachers' work. In teaching the subjects it was crucial that the programmes were "faithfully complied with", apart from "any fully justified exception which had been authorised by the Government". But this was not a "blind and rash obedience that was identical in all cases". What was at stake was to really translate and

process an execution that was adapted to the "pupils" and to the "duration of the lesson". Jaime Moniz demanded intelligence in measure while combining several components – between "science", the "legal stipulations" and the "teachers' practice" itself – to arrive at "establishment of the maximum and minimum of teaching for each matter".

Alongside the economy of the programmed materials, the management of the classroom activities appeared: half the teaching time would have to be spent "giving the explanations needed to understand the following lesson". With regard to this particular aspect, the director-general points out that he could not "allow each teacher to modify practice in line with his own free will", as seemed to have been addressed through a legal stipulation.

A third kind of recommendation was linked to the exercises or "best practices", as Jaime Moniz called them. He reminded the teachers that exercises were the most "powerful and effective" of teaching tools. And he went on to explain: "this proposition, which explained in words what only the highest intelligence could reach, becomes obvious and evident for all, lasts longer in the memory, obtains a deeper understanding, if through practical exercises it is developed or clarified; afterwards, it is not sufficient just to know the rule – one must carry it out, acquire the habit of applying it, and this can only be achieved by undertaking practical exercises". This same principle is applied in the teaching of living languages, which should be done "through the spoken word".

Finally, there was the issue of pupil discipline. "Good order" and "obedience of laws and school regulations" would be strictly maintained by the teachers. The school authorities would soon start to imagine the teachers as a guarantee, in the first instance, of the cohesion and uniformity of the population as a whole. It was important that everything possible was done so that in the assessment of the performance of their pupils there were no sharp divergences or variations. All the grades would be "agreed after conferring" among the teachers of the class. And each one of the teachers who had a management role in the secondary school should "take note", case by case, of all the pupils who revealed "unequal application in the different subjects", so that they could "take greater advantage" of the

lessons in subjects they were “behind” in. But this responsibility went beyond the teacher in question, and encompassed all the teaching staff. It is a standardising language in its pure expression that here again came to the fore, this time in the midst of the Republican regime.

It was the teacher’s obligation to see that the class progressed “compact and homogeneous in the teaching, without leaving failing pupils behind”. As soon as such a pupil was “noted”, the task was to “investigate the nature of the failing” that dominated in this pupil, so that the process to fight against it could be “usefully applied”. It is on this point, at the exact instant of discovery of a distancing from the standard, that new forms of documental register arose, implying all the hierarchical chains of the institution. It was not permitted to apply a grade lower than “poor to sufficient”, without the teacher of the subject having “informed in writing” the teacher nominated to supervise the class of the reasons – “not in undefined and vague terms, but specifically outlining the cause, i.e. lack of attention and application, poor understanding and application” – for the weak performance. In turn, this second figure should transmit the information “in a bulletin” to the headmaster.

This document would report all the means and methods that had been implemented to fight the “failing”, as well as an evaluation of their “effectiveness or non-effectiveness”. In this last situation the headmaster would inform the family of the pupil, “whereby this communication is registered”. The same process would be implemented when a student received a “grade lower than good regarding behaviour”. In order that the information referring to this problem-pupil was absolutely “complete”, the teacher would have to “also confer with the class teachers”, seeking “the opinion” they had of this same pupil “to complete their own concept”.

All this because in the “modern teaching guidelines” simple isolated endeavours were

“deficient” (Decree 230, of 21/9/1914). Once again disciplinary considerations led to the development of increasingly complex and sophisticated techniques of registering the individual. The file was fed by deviance and conflict, seeming to grow solely to come up with an effective response. The entire modern power was based on the development of forms of control at distance. There was no chance of building a network of agencies among one another and the same programme without the circulation of documents. The central State organised the table – with the respective inputs – and would share it among all the parties involved.

This obviously was not a question of organising a single vision of men and things, but of generating compatible reports. There was no standardised pattern of answers; there were only descriptions depending on the educational programmes and projects in question. The State’s power was materialised therefore in a taxonomy about what each actor should invest, highlighting his creative capacity, pushing forward what was believed to be the mission he was charged with. In each secondary school the mastery over people and things would depend on the ability of the headmaster, the teacher, the doctor, the secretary, etc, to discover, combine, calculate, mobilise and constantly design new realities based on the fields of discourse supplied.

In a word, the power of the State was to exercise an action at distance, but it gave each actor the possibility to transform himself into a new centre able to act on the various points of the chain. That is where we came from; that is where we are.

JORGE RAMOS DO Ó  
(Lisbon, November 2008)

Translated by Thomas Kundert

