

What's Left? Portuguese Cultural Studies

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To start an introduction to a thematic issue on Portuguese Cultural Studies that purportedly aims at bringing attention to such studies and to foster them with the question of “what’s left?” may seem odd at least, if not completely misguided. But of course, the question is intended not as a provocation but as a serious appeal to take stock, right from the beginning, both of the way in which any supposedly new method, disciplinary aggregate, or even inclination, in academic discourse must first of all contend with previous, established forms with which it clashes, as well as to the way in which Cultural Studies has always been involved with the political and specifically with a certain kind of left politics. From the ever-growing pile of studies and discussions on what exactly might constitute Cultural Studies, it is evident that one of its main areas of contention involves literary studies, traditional literary studies at least, of the kind that have formed the backbone of university education in the Arts for a great part of the twentieth century. The debate is anything but academic since what is at stake is not simply one label or another but, rather, the configuration of what ought to be higher learning, what might constitute scholarship, what passes for theoretical rather than applied knowledge, the formation and division of labor in universities, the intellectual grounding of new generations of students who, for the most part, bereft of possibilities for an academic career will join a work force more often than not shaped by the desires and needs of multinational corporations, and perhaps the very idea of the university itself.

Conflicts among diverse university bodies are of course nothing new and Kant’s *Der Streit der Fakultäten* [1798] remains a key text to guide us in understanding many aspects of the contemporary struggles. Cultural Studies, such as have been gaining ground especially in American and other Anglophone universities have clashed directly with a variety of more traditional disciplines, chiefly with literary studies, history, anthropology and sociology. For literary studies the advent of Cultural Studies might seem particularly nefarious given the endemic lack of confidence among many of its practitioners as to the value of the discipline they practice when compared to other more clearly “scientific” or objective ones, and certainly when confronted with increasing demands for accountability by society at large. Add to this declining enrollments, students who arrive at the gates of the University with ever less general humanistic knowledge, externally imposed budgetary restraints, and the increasing popularity of media and communication studies, and the stage is set for a murderous struggle. However, one should be careful not to lose sight of particular circumstances and positionings. Portuguese Studies are not directly comparable to American Studies and there are also important differences between what we might understand as Portuguese Studies as they are practiced in Portugal or Brazil, and as they take shape in other countries.

Furthermore, when speaking of Portuguese Studies one cannot be certain of having a consensus at all. Clearly, it would seem that in any variant the study of literature would be central, if by literature we understand those canonized texts that have been most influential in shaping an idea of Portuguese culture across the centuries. But the study of such

influential authors and texts – say, Gil Vicente, Bernardim Ribeiro, Camões, Eça, Pessoa – has never been limited just to the study of their literary qualities. Under the rubric of Portuguese Studies we would have no problem accepting historical, biographical or linguistic studies, just as we would not exclude studies that place those texts in their political, philosophical and social context. I think it is safe to say that the difficulty with Cultural Studies stems not from its interdisciplinary nature but rather from its political goals and from its decentering effect. Taking the first of these to task, it seems obvious that literary studies only has to gain from admitting the political, certainly given the fact that Portuguese society and Portuguese cultural production was for so long under the yoke of a dictatorial regime, the effects of which are not to be underestimated. And one could think in a similar way about Brazil or Angola, Mozambique and other Lusophone nations. As to the second element, the decentralizing effect might be what troubles most literary scholars as it would seem that the invasion of new media or the focus on popular forms of culture would threaten the established values associated with canonical works. As J. Hillis Miller aptly puts it, “[the] crisis of representation for literature departments accompanies a larger crisis of representation for the university as a whole, in particular for the humanities as an element in a new kind of university in a different world, a world of global economy and global communication” (55-56). The fear, quite clearly, is that as literature loses more and more of its perceived value as a privileged cultural artifact through which one can best approach universal categories of the human as well as particular, national, characteristics, our role as literary scholars and thus as both bearers of tradition as well as mentors of future (elite) generations, will also dissolve into thin air. Obviously, I think that neither fear is grounded but also would like to point out that the traditional role of a university education has come into question and the enmeshment of the university with market forces cannot be ignored.

Whereas in the United States, in England, in Australia, Cultural Studies has by now come to occupy definite institutional forms, however different they might be in specific cases, the same cannot be said of Portugal. Indeed, it would seem that even a discussion of the function of literary studies or of the role for Cultural Studies is not a very pressing issue, in spite of the fact that both Portuguese society as well as Portuguese universities are just as enmeshed in the same predicaments. That situation was the reason behind the organization in the spring of 2000, of an international conference on “Portuguese Cultural Studies” at the Institute of Romance Studies in London. I would like to stay clear from the fallacious view that such an apparent lack of urgency in Portugal would denote a certain belatedness in regard to developments abroad, just as I would like to stay clear from the naïve but stridently voiced view of self-appointed critical redeemers that Portuguese literary studies would lag behind in theoretical matters. Rather, I think that as in everything, one must take into account specificities of positioning and context. In this respect it is highly informative to read the interview with Maria Alzira Seixo, in which some of the concerns I have been touching upon are addressed and in which she makes clear that in the specific institutional context of Portugal it has come to Comparative Literature to take on a role which enables some of that renewal of literary studies to take place. Lucidly, Maria Alzira Seixo summarizes the different constraints operating in the Portuguese case:

No fundo, a relação entre Literatura Comparada, Teoria e Estudos Culturais, embora com o respeito devido às respectivas dominâncias (e até com a diferenciação inclusiva que os vários caminhos no interior de cada área implicam), diz-nos apenas, mas muito intensamente, que o ensino e o estudo da Literatura: 1º - não podem mais praticar-se como se praticavam há dez ou vinte anos (e muito menos como se praticavam há trinta, o que EFECTIVAMENTE ainda acontece); 2º - que os Estudos Literários, ao contrário do que se pensa e receia, não estão a

apagar-se, mas a desenvolver-se e a cobrir fenómenos de expressão e de comunicação cada vez alargados.

What is also implied in these comments is that the role of literary studies is intrinsically a political one. This is not to say that one should confuse literature with politics, or that one could mistake a shift in methodology for social change. Cultural Studies will not alter the relations of power. But by assuming as one of its main modes of operation a critique of culture, Portuguese Cultural Studies can have a role in shaping future generations. The debate on the relation of Cultural Studies to Portuguese Studies is an important one and one that needs to be expanded, just as it is necessary to produce specific examples of what such a version of Portuguese Cultural Studies might be. For both, this current issue of the Luso-Brazilian Review is intended as stimulus.

WORKS CITED

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