The ‘Two Cultures’ in Nineteenth-Century Portugal: Scholarship v. Science in Higher Education

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Abstract

In the nineteenth century, the Portuguese intelligentsia addressed one of the issues that confronted them with other European countries: the need to face the challenges of industrialisation through educational reform. This paper focuses on the main issue of university reform at a time when the only university in the country, Coimbra, showed signs of excessive conservatism both in its syllabus and teaching methods, and was confronted with new proposals for the introduction of technological disciplines or the creation of polytechnical schools. A parallel will also be drawn with the ongoing debate on the same subject in England.

Keywords

University, education, culture, tradition, science

In the well-known Reith Lecture of 1959, C. P. Snow stressed what appeared to him to be a major cultural problem in Western society: it was “increasingly being split into two polar groups... the literary intellectuals ... and the scientists” (Snow 1978: 3-4). For Lord Snow, a huge gap had evolved between these groups, separating them into two different cultures, which did not communicate with each other and, worse than this, could even be hostile to each other. This polarisation generated an immense intellectual loss. For Snow, the situation required drastic measures, involving the breaking of a longstanding pattern of education at all levels.

This pattern was set in the nineteenth century, when education became both a major social problem and a major solution for social problems. Different diagnoses were made of the social situation and different solutions were attempted, involving a broad range of responses: from childhood to adult education; from innovation in methodology to innovation in content; from reform of the old institutions to the creation of countless new ones. But, already in the early nineteenth century, the main line of argument was whether education should focus essentially on the formation of the character through the study of the classics, or whether it should follow utilitarian guidelines and prepare young people for a useful profession, helping to increase technological capabilities and to meet the challenges of industrialisation. Or, to quote the words of Robert J. C. Young:

"A sublime elevation versus a rational ground, a glorious truth versus vulgar utility, knowledge for its own sake versus debasing instrumentality, quality of mind versus practical needs, the universal versus the particular: such were the terms of the debate which, in spite of local variations, has remained the basis of discussions of university education from that day to this (Young 1996: 188)."

This paper seeks to compare the way the English intelligentsia pondered the role of education in general and of the universities in particular, in the decades of swift industrial change from roughly the 1820s to the 1860s, with the concerns shown by the Portuguese intelligentsia in relation to the same subject. Roughly the same questions were raised, and, as Robert Young said, they still remain much the same today. We can perhaps summarise the main problems faced then and now under three main headings: 1) the opposition between literary and scientific knowledge; 2) the nature of the institutions of higher education dedicated either to the one or the other, i.e. universities and technical schools; and 3) the nature of state intervention in institutions of higher learning. We could, of