

## Learning from within: on students, olives and ethnographic knowledge

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“The happiness visible to the eye of a thinker is the happiness of mankind”

T. W. Adorno (2007: 203)

“It is not the ‘actual’ interconnections of ‘things’ but the *conceptual* interconnections of *problems* which define the scope of the various sciences. A new ‘science’ emerges where new problems are pursued by new methods and truths are thereby discovered which open up significant new points of view”.

– Max Weber, quoted by Paul Rabinow (2003:31)

### **Introduction: happy thoughts**

The invitation to write a contribution to the present volume is a quite interesting opportunity for a preliminary reflection on the experience of working with tourism students at the University of Évora. This text is, therefore, bounded by a reflexive account of this experience, placing in perspective the daily practices and teaching agendas at the classroom over the timeframe of 2003-2013. Methodologically, I carry out a self reflexive exploratory documentary research. The documents and fragments under analysis are, among others, in my personal archive (digital and printed versions). Additionally, I will also make use of students’ assignments to illustrate the intertwined process of learning from within, in a collaborative way.

It might be still spring when, in 2001, I had my first encounter with the idea of designing a degree in Tourism Studies at University of Évora. Professors Francisco M. Ramos and Carlos A. da Silva, from the Sociology Department, were having a drink at the end of an afternoon, sitting at the esplanade of *Tuna*, a cafe located near the university’s main building. They invited me for drinks and mentioned the idea of creating a new degree. Months later they had envisioned Tourism studies at the core of a new degree, this idea gained form, in the way of a proposal for the creation of a Degree in ‘Tourism and Development’. The Department of Sociology had already experienced researchers dealing with development processes, and their own history as section of rural extension in the 1980’s enabled further scopes of social sciences directed towards a social phenomenon such as tourism. Last, but not least, some of the teaching staff of the Sociology Department had also been already been researching and publishing on the topic. Beyond the university context, there was also a regional, national and international framework where tourism processes were becoming increasingly visible and relevant. Those were the years shortly after the world exhibition of Expo98; the time when the Alqueva dam became a reality, when tourism projects, (partially funded by European Union), were expanding in the territory. Those were also the years when the town of Evora, after more than a decade of UNESCO

listing, was undergoing political changes in the local governance of the city hall. And in the vicinity town of Beja, an airport was in the process of being built. During the following months there was collaborative work with other senior colleagues, under coordination of Professor Francisco Ramos. The first proto-syllabus proposal in Anthropology of Tourism I was asked to contribute to is dated from as early as September 13<sup>th</sup> 2001. Among the core aims of the course were, as follows (Ramos & Pires, 2001: 1)

*“1. Situar o fenómeno turístico no contexto analítico da Antropologia; 2. Fornecer quadros de referência e instrumentos teórico-conceituais de abordagem do turismo, em óptica antropológica; 3. Promover a compreensão e análise crítica da dimensão cultural do fenómeno turístico”.*

Given the cultural dimensions of tourism as an activity in the area of *Alentejo*, and the overall profile of the tourism degree that the University designed, a plural team of staff has been involved in teaching. I was asked to contribute to this project from an anthropology/ethnography point of view. Among the teaching activities at the Department of Sociology/ School of Social Sciences there was, within the tourism studies curriculum, the introduction of two subject courses closely intertwined: Anthropology of Tourism and Ethnography and Tourism. They have had several lecturers over the years, due to staff constraints. The changes in the social *milieu* and in the academic context over the last ten years have been many, and the impacts of *Bolonha* Process, even if beyond the scope of this text, are not without meaning.

For practical reasons, in this text, I will focus my attention in the experience of teaching “Ethnography and Tourism” to undergraduates, because it is the course I have accompanied more closely over the years. Our main focus of research and teaching has been directed towards teaching exploratory ethnographic methods in order to promote an understanding of the material and immaterial dimensions of the cultural contexts of the region and beyond. Secondly, and, at the same time, we also learn ethnography by reading and discussing comparative research of other ethnographies of tourism spaces, eliciting, among the students, the ethical problems raised by the consequences of tourism in peoples’ cultural settings.

### **1. On tourism students, anthropology classes and ethnographic knowledge**

It is easy to understand, in the current context of the social sciences in Portugal and Europe, the reason why Evora’s undergraduate students majoring in tourism are so interested in this activity. Experience of interactions in the classroom and elsewhere bring back the image of a group of people focusing in this central category – Tourism – and building up their professional and student identity around it.

Within this learning process, we use ethnographic knowledge to promote a wider contextual reading of tourism within other dimensions of social life. First of all, ethnography course on third semester of tourism studies degree offers a comprehensive approach to the understanding of tourism processes, by observing the contextual nature of the practices of people. Observations are both direct (through empirical short situations of interaction) and also indirect, though the reading of

ethnographies. This has been the framework within which ethnography has been taught to undergraduate students over the last ten years. Thinking outside the tourism box, expanding perspectives, focusing in alternative worldviews, enhancing creative thinking, are among the predicaments of teaching ethnography to tourism students at the University of Evora.

### 1.1. Ethnography's "soft focus"

I follow here Tim Ingold's perspective on anthropology as "a sustained and disciplined inquiry into the conditions and potentials of human life" (Ingold, 2011: 3). As such, if "people move, anthropologists follow their movement to a new site, whether refugee camp, centre for migrant labour, or tourist destination" (MacClancy, 2002: 12). Ethnographical approaches to tourism are not new, as anthropologists have encountered tourists virtually everywhere and have been writing about it for several decades. They use, in terms of method, "the anthropological approach of intensive interaction with one particular group of people, including learning their language, for a prolonged period of time" (MacClancy, 2002: 7). Ethnography, as we have learnt in classroom, is therefore "a way of generalizing about humanity" (Peacock, 2001: 110), and expresses a soft focus on reality. I borrow this metaphor from James Peacock, Cambridge based anthropologist. Following Peacock (2001: 111-112):

However glaring the light illuminating the object of ethnographic study, focus on that object cannot be precise in the sense of the lens narrowing its field to pinpoint only that object. In the ethnographic experience, the photographer is part of the camera, and both are part of the foreground being photographed as well as of the background that infuses the foreground. Accordingly, focus is necessarily soft or, in a deep sense, holistic, in order to capture the elements surrounding the object of focus as well as the object. The resulting picture is multidimensional, a kind of hologram that can be glimpsed with tantalizing clarity from certain angles, but that dissolves into hazy depths owing to the complex convergence of forces that create the image.

Among these forces are the vectors of power and status that implicate the anthropologist in immediate field situations as well as the larger global context. Such an intersection is a crucial piece of anthropology's significance in the contemporary world (Peacock 2001: 111-112).

The ethnographic approach to tourism is conceived as one among various dimensions of reflexivity within the analysis of cultural processes. Following MacClancy, anthropological accounts "can make the familiar strange as well. In other words, they can both place seemingly unusual costumes in their local cultural logics *and* draw out the cultural peculiarity of seemingly natural Western ideas. In this reflexive mode, anthropology can act as a very powerful tool for understanding our own position in the world" (MacClancy, 2002: 7-8).

## 2. Olives and beyond. Two ethnographic experiments:

Browsing through the last ten years of teaching practices, one recalls that there are some assignments by students that became highlighted over the years. The ones presented here are cases where experiments in ethnography produced some kind of disruptive thinking on the relations between culture, ethnography and tourism. One of

those is the collective work *Ceifeiras do Alentejo*, by students Telma Soldado, Ima Fernandes, Susana Bibes and Isabel Pinho (Soldado *et. al.*, 2011). We worked together in academic year 2011-2012 and they designed a collective exploratory assignment interviewing elderly residents that had worked in the agricultural activities as *ceifeiras*. The learning process of ethnography was intertwined with the learning process of transcribing and analysing interviews of persons (older residents) and making sense of their words and their worldviews. The self-images of these women, though, are very different from the iconic images sold in tourism postcards and souvenirs. This has underlined a critical approach to ethnography and tourism. In the words of the students (Soldado *et. al.*, 2012: 47):

“Ao longo deste trabalho e principalmente depois de tratados e analisados os dados obtidos através das entrevistas foi-nos possível verificar que a imagem bucólica das ceifeiras [...] não corresponde à realidade”.

In search of more realism in tourism settings, they are looking for an alternative way to present and narrate the hardships of the rural workers' past lives:

“Por isso nós pretendemos com este trabalho propor que se crie e demonstre uma outra visão: O lado escondido da ceifeira. Onde fosse possível mostrar a face oculta da vida desta gente [...]. E para o qual [...] conseguiríamos ter nichos de mercado turístico muito interessados em [...] o que estas gentes viveram [...] tendo em conta as verdadeiras condições em que viviam”.

Even though the students are still in an early stage of research, the predicaments of critical ethnography could be applied here. According to Jim Thomas:

“Critical Ethnographers begin from a view of “what is out there to know”, or an *ontology*, that furnishes a set of images and metaphors in which various forms of oppression constitute what is to be known. The things we normally believe to be “out there” come from uncritically accepted preconceived assumptions about the world” [...]. “Borrowing from Lukacs (1971a), critical realism penetrates to the deeper levels of meaning that lie beneath superficial surface appearances. Bodies of ideas, norms, and ideologies create meanings for constructing social subjects and concepts like “gender”, “race”, and “student”. These and other roles and identities typify the invisible realm of meanings that typify the invisible realm of meanings that stratify people and distribute power and resources in subtle ways (Thomas, 1993: 34).

Through the discovery of the peoples' working practices in the fields, Telma Soldado and her fellow student colleagues unfold a collective preliminary counter-narrative of the touristy appropriations of pastimes social life in the southern fields of Portugal. This ontology of realism and experience is present in other students' ethnographic experiments. The following example emerges from a perspective of doing fieldwork at their residential area, and describing contexts that are accessed through the students' own family members. It is the case of Pedro Cebola's group work carrying out an ethnographic account and comparison of “the traditional” and the mechanical modes of plugging olives near Evora (Cebola *et. al.*, 2012).

Entitled “Apanha da Azeitona: práticas, engenho e tradição”, this work is based in interviews and participant explorations of olive seasonal works, in November and december 2011. The disruptive point in this work was not the description in itself, but the reflexivity around the group of students’ own representations of how “tradition” and “olives” intersect. The group was formed of five students which, after interviews and data analysis, carried out a video recreation of the activities of plugging olives. This video was filmed in the property of one of the student’s grandparents. For this, they have decided to dress differently than usual – hearing hats and clothes that some of them borrowed from their grandparents. Being asked to be vigilant of the danger of essentializing the rural world, they ended up bringing to surface their own memories of the spaces of their childhood and adolescence. According to student Sabina Santos:

“A participação no vídeo foi uma experiência reveladora dos meus primeiros tempos de adolescente, pois recordei algumas técnicas utilizadas aquando da minha primeira experiência alguns anos atrás. No entanto, nessa primeira vez a experiência não foi meramente representativa, carecia de alguma responsabilidade e trabalho, pois fui remunerada durante uma semana e meio” (Cebola et. al, 2012: 20).

The cultural meaning of plugging olives is understated by the group but their agenda is made clear at the students’ final remarks:

“Actualmente, o desenvolvimento económico do Alentejo está muito assente na actividade turística [...]. Neste sentido é importante documentar [...] o que esteja ligado à apanha da azeitona [...], tais como os cantares, o traje e todos os utensílios usados para o efeito, para que um dia a identidade de um povo não fique apenas na memória dos mais velhos” (Cebola et. al., 2012: 21).

Even though this words could be understood by readers of ethnography as a rather salvage ethnography perspective, the main aspects of learning from within, when studying tourism, are at the core of these students’ concerns. The aim, further, was to deconstruct the biased images of the folk represented by the old costumes that the students are wearing in the video.

### **3. (In)Conclusion**

It would be too easy to design ethnographic questions on the predicaments of tourism “in the stark terms of good versus bad, of the upright against the voracious, of local versus developers” (MacClancy, 2002b: 421). However, as we usually discuss in classes, “closer examination reveals that the encounter with organized tourism cannot always be portrayed in diverse shades of gray. And it is here perhaps that social anthropology can make its greatest contribution to the study and understanding of tourism and its effects” (MacClancy, 2002b: 421)

The ethnographic experiments above mentioned, are a portrait of alternative ways of dealing with linkages between ethnography and tourism. All the students were part of the same classroom (2011/2012), but their modes of interacting with and discussing the connections between ethnography and tourism are somewhat different. The first, Telma Soldado’s work on *Ceifeiras*, ends up deconstructing de-folklorizing the object of research. On the other hand, the second work, aims to contribute to the

preservation and the folklorization, for tourism processes and beyond, of the activity of plugging olives. Both groups of students learn ethnography from within their insights on life, and on human condition, and on themselves. At the moment of writing, former student Pedro Cebola is in a working trip to London. I haven't heard from the rest of the students recently. I suspect they have graduated by now, and I hope that they are having happy thoughts in their daily professional and personal lives. Whether or not their daily encounters with(in) tourism are mediated by ethnographical curiosity and its' soft focus.

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Ema Pires, University of Évora, 7th November 2013