

Conferences

Delfim Santos. An Innovator and Precursor in the Field of Education

Lisbon Academy of Sciences, November 2007

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I did not know Delfim Santos personally, but was always “connected” to his personal and academic life and, more importantly, always admired his work in the field of Education. It should be noted that this indirect “connection” stemmed from a certain parallelism between our backgrounds. We were both born in Porto, we graduated in Historical and Philosophical Sciences, took courses at the University of Coimbra (he a PhD and I a degree course). We were both teachers of Pedagogical Sciences at the Faculty of Letters of the University of Lisbon and we lectured the same subjects, at different periods, of course. What is interesting is that I became the first full professor of Educational Sciences of the University of Lisbon (which followed after Pedagogical Sciences) almost thirty years after his death. However, and above all, we were both strongly influenced by existentialist currents and much of our thinking and interventions in the field of Education were geared towards the principles and practices of Existentialism. These are some of the reasons behind the following text.

Delfim Santos was a prominent figure in mid 20th century Portuguese culture. He strongly influenced a wide range of fields of thought and civil and cultural interventions. He was an original thinker, with a refined, creative slant, and his work was more broadly expressed in the field of Philosophy.

With a degree in Historical and Philosophical Sciences from the Faculty of Letters of the University of Porto, he received a doctorate from the Faculty of Letters of the University of Coimbra, having resided for some years in a number of countries such as Germany, where he lectured at the University of Berlin and where he took several courses in the field of Philosophy and Pedagogy. In 1943, he entered the Faculty of Letters of the University of Lisbon as main assistant. In 1948, he became an extraordinary professor, going on to become a full professor of Pedagogical Sciences in 1950. Among

the many posts he held and activities in which he was involved, along with his duties at the university, he was also elected member of the Lisbon Academy of Sciences in 1960 and nominated Director of the Centre for Pedagogical Studies of the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation in 1963, which was created as a result of his initiative. He died suddenly in 1965, before reaching the age of 59.

In addition to his multiple interventions in the field of Education (conferences, press articles, participation in debates), he published the remarkable *Fundamentação Existencial da Pedagogia* [Existential Grounds of Pedagogy] in 1946. It is a unique piece of work in the panorama of Portuguese educational literature. It is quite rare to find something unique among the European literature in the field. While re-reading it, I was led to establish a parallelism with the work of Bogdan Suchodolski, namely his *Pedagogy and the Great Philosophical Trends — the Pedagogy of Essence and the Pedagogy of Existence*. It should be noted that Suchodolski is regarded as one of the great educational philosophers of the 20th century.

Delfim Santos and Bogdan Suchodolski are around the same age but I do not believe they were acquainted with each other’s work, since neither quoted the other. The parallelism that may be established between them is extremely interesting, starting with the main sources for their thinking, which may be found in German culture and philosophy, more specifically in Husserl, Heidegger and Jaspers. Nor am I wrong to affirm that both authors share an identical background which may be said to shift from phenomenology to existentialism, leading to the formulation of a humanist philosophy which supports the “from man to man” pedagogy they defend.

They are both critical of an essentialist, extemporal and universalist pedagogy, detached from life, real men and their historicity, but differ in terms of different conceptions of the social: Delfim Santos, remains faithful to existential pedagogy, searching for the anthropological

meaning of education, not in the construction of man on the basis of a pre-defined essence, but in his revelation “of life through life”; Suchodolski, criticizes the naturalist deviations of existential pedagogy and searches for the synthesis of essential and existential pedagogies by means of a Marxist way of thinking.

The reference to Suchodolski was merely to highlight the current and European nature of the work of Delfim Santos, since it is the work of the latter that is at the centre of this writing. Some of his works have been used to highlight his opposition to essentialist pedagogy, the dominant pedagogical practices of his time and some of the research supporting them. Reference has been made to the works *Fundamentação Existencial da Pedagogia* [Existential Grounds of Pedagogy] *A Pedagogia como Ciência Autônoma* [Pedagogy as an Autonomous Science] and *Da Filosofia* [Of Philosophy].

Based on the difference between “to be” and “being”, developed in *Of Philosophy*, Delfim Santos states that (and I quote) “the subject of education is the ‘transient man’, the man who searches for himself and reveals himself in that which is still insecure and undefined, tending towards a level of affirmation called personality”.

As Alberto Ferreira points out in “Statements in Homage to Delfim Santos” (in *O Tempo e o Modo* [The Time and Way]), the main question, as far as Delfim Santos is concerned, is not to find out “what” man is but, rather “who” he is. The first question requires a descriptive and explanatory answer, the second a more comprehensive one. If we can refer to Dilthey and the distinction he makes between explanatory Psychology and comprehensive Psychology, the latter capable of understanding the totality of life, the statement (also highlighted by Alberto Ferreira) that “The enumeration of ‘what’ constitutes man reduces the problems to the level of fragmentary knowledge, annihilating the man as a whole” which, without failing to refer to the same source of influence, is clearly current and up to date in its formulation.

From the perspective of the grounds of humanist pedagogy, Delfim Santos tells us in his *Fundamentação*: “Personality formation is a dramatic process which has to be guided by the pedagogue, respecting the ‘character’ of the pupil”. Humanist pedagogy, in order to be so, has to be an existential pedagogy. Furthermore, in defense of his perspective, he falls back on Sartre, the Sartre of *Nausea*:

Contingency is the most important aspect... No necessary being can explain existence; contingency is not a false aspect, an appearance that may dissipate; it is the absolute, consequently complete gratuity.

There is, however, an aspect where Delfim Santos differs from other educational philosophers, namely Bogdan Suchodolski. I am referring to his constant search for

conceptual instruments which accomplish his theoretical perspectives in educational practice. As a man of action and social intervention, Delfim Santos believed that the knowledge of the pupil and the learning process were the two main concerns. Thus, he was attentive to the new conceptions and research which emerged during his period, both in the field of Psychology and in Physiology. While rejecting mechanistic and behaviorist explanations, Delfim Santos highlighted the work of Binet and the use of tests in Education. He defended a school where, to use his own words “one learned through learning”, gave value to characterology as a means of getting to know the child and adolescent, and was attentive to the emerging revolution in the field of Pedagogy, not only due to new discoveries within the scope of Psychology, such as the case of Gestaltism, but also research being developed in the field of motivation.

From another perspective, it is worth noting his concern with arousing awareness in society with a view to changing attitudes towards Education. The dozens of articles he published in the press, the conferences he gave to a wide range of audiences were all meant to support such concern on the part of the citizen and man of culture he was. The themes he addressed cover the main fields of education and are still surprisingly current and updated. The decentralization of education, compulsory schooling, professional guidance and professional education, education reforms, primary education, the mission of the university, school inadaptation, educational environment, the Montessori school and new education, the role and purpose of exams and teacher training are some of the themes addressed by Delfim Santos which fully express the extent of his work.

He gives special attention to teacher training since “the school structure, inspired by pedagogy based on the intention to transmit or generate knowledge” to use the words of M. S. Lourenço (in the afore-mentioned “Statements”) is dependent on the teachers themselves. The term “generate” is used because, as far as Delfim Santos is concerned, “General knowledge, in other words, knowledge that is generated from itself and from that which is acquired and serves to support the real knowledge of each individual, [and] not that which is passively received but that which recreates itself to the level of education, itself”.

General knowledge implies a teacher who has knowledge of the pedagogical and scientific dimensions of his/her profession and who is also a constructor of knowledge. In a conference given at the *Liceu Normal de Pedro Nunes* [Pedro Nunes Secondary School] in 1958, Delfim Santos stated:

Our teachers, in general, are well prepared and sometimes their demands even exceed those that are necessary; however, they are not trained to use such preparation for

the benefit of educational action. For this very reason, it is dangerous for the young graduate to enter a class to teach without any pedagogical training. Failure is to be expected. The atmosphere of the class will have to be previously examined through an individual study of the pupils, and only after establishing the respective sociogram, the preliminary work expected of each trainee, can one act in accordance with its polarity or bipolarity.

In short, he refers to a pedagogical training sustained by good, scientific preparation, which is not restricted to the field of knowledge but based on the process of its construction, as he sets out in the same text:

Subjective training, so to speak, should be given to the teacher in addition to objective training. This means that the teacher cannot be a mere holder of a science, but should also be able to recreate the science itself on the basis of its grounds and history. We can only teach that which we are capable of doing or, at least, of fully understanding how others have done something. To teach the final results, the last level of progress in a specific field of knowledge is an abuse of authority. Furthermore, only the author or he/she who is capable of authorizing him/herself with the genetic knowledge of what he/she teaches should be allowed authority in education.

We could interpret these statements as the projection of the university teacher whose vocation it is to bring research and education together, or even as an implicit criticism of the purely transmissive university education of the time, which did not encourage the participation of students in the construction of knowledge process. Why should he not evoke the influences of his basic training in the extinct Faculty of Letters of Porto, to which he always remained faithful. Perhaps there is more to it than this and we can interpret these lines as a display of a constructivist position, in keeping with existential pedagogy. Delfim Santos also demonstrates how up to date he is by bringing together the teaching of subjects and the methodologies of their construction, which was a preponderant trend in teaching methodologies from the sixties onwards.

Let us focus on the main issue: how does Delfim Santos view pedagogy? We believe that it is mainly through opposition to an atomist and technicist pedagogy (or, as is more commonly said today, through a criticism of the technical rationality in Pedagogy) and through the influence of globalism and a situational pedagogy based on Dilthey, that we can infer the conceptions of pedagogy in Delfim Santos. In accordance with what was the case from the end of the 19th century onwards, pedagogy is a polyssemic term which may mean pedagogical practice (in other words, teacher practice, a good practice, its reflection and theorization), but also the art of

education, the science and art of education, the science of Education. In the Works of Delfim Santos, we are confronted with two main concepts. The first is pedagogy, as the reflection and rationalization of educational practice anchored in the anthropological conception of man as a “transient being”. However, it is also based on the discovery of values, on the anteriority of Pedagogy in relation to Moral and in the Pedagogy of authenticity. Bestowed with a profound “esprit de finesse”, the pedagogical thinking of Delfim Santos is prodigious in intuitions which he often points to without developing. A particularly interesting example is the affirmation of the “Eros” of Pedagogy which, nowadays, has taken on an accentuated relevance in currents of various influences, which highlight the emotional side of education. In the second, despite being in articulation with the former, there is a conception of pedagogy as an autonomous science, even though with recourse to the contributions of the other subjects of man, which are necessary to the knowledge of the pupil.

On establishing the distinction between preciseness and rigor in science, Delfim Santos adopted a position which was not common in his time, and defined an issue that had great consequences in later decades. I will go on to quote what he wrote in 1949, in *Pedagogia como Ciência Autónoma* [Pedagogy as an Autonomous Science]:

Pedagogy is not a precise science, but, like any other frame of reference for man, it may be a strict science and, it will be so when it sets out not to find general truths but, in contrast, human truths.

Human truths which, in the opinion of Delfim Santos, can not be attained by means of traditional scientific criteria, as he points out in the following quotation:

(...) the criteria which only considered that which could be formularily translated into quantitative relations to be scientific is both enormous and violent.

His most harsh criticism is of the quantitative exaggerations of psycho-pedagogical research, such as when there is a reference to distortion of the work of Binet by “zoo technicians and vets acting as pedagogues”.

So, in this way, a door to reflection is opened pointing to a discussion of the great consequences in later decades, which became known as the epistemological quarrel of methods — quantitative methods *versus* qualitative methods —, both in human sciences in general, as well as in Educational Sciences particularly. This controversy is losing meaning nowadays, mainly with the increasing assumption of phenomenological analysis as the grounds of research in Educational Sciences. Furthermore, once again, Delfim Santos (in *Da Filosofia*) positions himself as a messenger of a new age. I quote: “If phenomenological

analysis shows us reality as the plurality of the diverse, no monolithic vision can be justifiable”.

Thus: no monolithic vision of methods or concepts.

Delfim Santos also refers to this difficulty and the need to overcome it in *Pedagogia como Ciência Autónoma*:

Pedagogy (refers to the pedagogy of the 1940s) is a patchwork blanket and the pedagogue who wishes to proceed with care and be updated in such field of knowledge will have to constantly incorporate new, unequal types of thinking based on a wide variety of sciences that detach him from the main theme which ought to be at the root of his main concerns: the learning process.

In other words, to use the language of Delfim Santos, Pedagogy cannot, and should not, consist of a sum of monisms. This was a problem that, in both epistemological and scientific terms, could not be resolved within the scope of Pedagogy *strictus sensus*, but which had other possibilities to develop with the constitution of modern Educational Sciences — both in theoretical terms, as well as in research practice — of which Delfim Santos was one of the precursors. In my opinion, this should be reason enough for his name and work to be remembered in the field of Education in the year which commemorates the hundredth anniversary of his birth.

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Lisbon Academy of Sciences, November 2007, in a session to pay tribute to Delfim Santos, in the year in which the hundredth anniversary of his birth was commemorated.

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Translated by Tânia Lopes da Silva

Estrela, Albano (2008). Delfim Santos. An Innovator and Precursor in the Field of Education. Conference given at the Lisbon Academy of Sciences, November 2007. *Sísifo. Educational Sciences Journal*, 06, pp. 101-104. Retrieved [month, year] from <http://sisifo.fpce.ul.pt>