“Curiosity is the most volatile of emotions. It only lasts as long as there is still something to be discovered. When you pull back the final veil, or even before, it fades away and you need another enigma.”

Lorenzo Silva, *The impatient alchemist*

7 March 2006

For me, Porto is an approachable city. I visited Porto several times, almost always as a tourist, during the ten years or so I spent living in and around Vigo. Only once did I venture more deeply into one of its “barrios” (neighbourhoods or districts) – Campanhã to be precise - while attending a series of seminars to present the results of a few years of community work within the scope of an urban rehabilitation programme developed with European funds. I remember a sociologist and a socio-cultural promoter showing us some council flats where they had worked and an all-purpose social centre used by less well-off residents of all ages. I took some books and documents, and years later I delved deeper into that experience when I had to study examples of urban rehabilitation. Some books described how some buildings in the historical quarter had been transformed or built after 25 April 1974.

That date marks the start of the Carnation Revolution, the name given to the virtually bloodless military-led coup which triggered the popular revolt that eventually led to the recent period of democracy in Portugal. It is the key historical event that has served as a backdrop for the films and documentaries I have seen, conferences I have listened to, books I have read and music I have discovered by *cantautores* (singer songwriters) such as José Afonso and Fausto, as well as the work of other more eclectic musicians such as the unique troubadour Pedro Barroso, the vitalistic jazz singer Maria João, the “new age” sounds of Rao Kyao or the reggae music of Kussondulola.

A few months ago I visited the Serralves Museum of Contemporary Art. One of the exhibitions there took visitors on a journey through the “public” architectural work of Álvaro Siza, who had actually designed the Serralves Museum together with many other world-famous buildings that have always fascinated me after discovering them almost by chance in Santiago de Compostela or in Alicante, for example. In fact, it was not that much of a coincidence because the first times that I heard his name were precisely in connection with the rehousing of residents from Porto’s historical centre after April 25th. And I also spent five years teaching sociology at an architecture and urban planning school in Vila Nova de Cerveira, in northern Portugal, situated on the border with Galicia, where I became familiar with Siza and other Portuguese architects.
To be honest I do not feel strange here, but I do feel that my presence may be perceived as strange, although that does not bother me too much. As regards the Portuguese language, I am largely self-taught and I harbour the hope that my travels around the world and my observations of this reality will mirror some interesting reflections for locals. This is perhaps one of the virtues of foreigners, non-conformists, passers through or dissidents. The truth is that it is unusual for strangers or foreigners to feel comfortable in their roles. But I’ve already become accustomed to the part I have to play. I’m sure I’ll make friends but I’m in no hurry and it’s not something that makes me anxious. I prefer to go with the flow of life in the city, drift around the neighbourhoods and gradually discover the feelings and crafts of the locals. I’m not in any hurry.

In the end, as urban anthropology experts know, we are at the mercy of our informers and our obsessions, and we are also, if I may be so bold, victims of chance, circumstances, institutions, work teams, football matches and an infinite number of other things. In fact, I must make a note in my diary to contact a lady I know who works at Afrontamento publishers and a geographer who knows the historical centre like the palm of his hand. Coming to thinking about it, studying the social life of cities is like selecting bits and pieces of a puzzle that surprise us and reveal deep-rooted and transcendental processes. It also means accepting that you have to ignore thousands of events and people stirring in the same urban current.

In a few days time Anibal Cavaco Silva will be sworn in as President of the Republic. He is a very conservative politician with a rigid appearance, and his induction will bring an end to ten years of social democrat rule under Jorge Sampaio, who I’ve always thought looks a little like the writer Saramago, I can’t think why. Sampaio ran for the Communist Party at the European elections, but I’ve never associated him with all the ideological baggage that the party still hauls along with it.

The whole country is still immersed in a certain economic crisis. Yesterday on the radio I heard that a lorry company had closed and laid off 50 workers. The company owner said he’d taken the decision because of competition and management mistakes. On the same day, the press published a report by Belgian economists claiming that the introduction of the Euro (European single currency) had severely harmed countries with high inflation rates such as Portugal. However, as in Spain, huge numbers of immigrants continue to flood into Portugal from other countries, mainly from Portuguese-speaking countries in Africa and Asia, and also from Brazil, although there is also a large influx of Eastern Europeans. So not everything must be going so badly. In fact, the TV always broadcasts a lot of news about the Portuguese-speaking world and one of the public channels – RTP - has one channel exclusively on the African continent. Conversely, Portugal has always seen Spain as a hostile neighbour, and more so in the last decade when many Spanish companies penetrated Portuguese markets. Nevertheless, it’s only fair to remember that last year Spanish television broadcast a series of documentaries on the “Raya Quebrada” (The Broken Line) which showed just how porous the Portuguese-Spanish border has always been, with people crossing from either side very freely over the centuries.

I was surprised to find an article in the literature section of the newspaper Primeiro de Janeiro written in perfect Spanish with no translation. Later on I read an interview with a leader of a civic group from Coimbra actively involved in municipal politics. The founder of that group was the sociologist Boaventura Sousa de Santos. His shadow will probably pursue me during my entire stay in Portugal because I discovered his books many years ago and he is
often portrayed in the media and in academic circles as a type of “anti-globalisation leader”. The lad who showed me round the apartment where I’m currently staying was a sociology graduate from the University of Coimbra and one of Boaventura’s former students. He told me that this was just a stop-gap job, which the Câmara had given him on a temporary basis until the programme that awards these properties to foreign researchers - Porto: Cidade da Ciencia (Porto: City of Science) - was finally up and running.

The flat is a “T-3” (Tipo-3, “Type Three”) class property in a council block of flats; this is the term used here to refer to three-bedroom flats. The other properties are rented directly by the Câmara (Municipal Chamber of Porto), a fairly frequent practice in social housing policies in Portugal, although all recent governments have tried to quash this “social renting” system. I’m sure my neighbours don’t have the same new furniture as I have in my flat: everything, absolutely everything, was bought at Ikea. The only Ikea store in Portugal is in Lisbon, a strong reason to prevent my neighbours from shopping there. They’re also extremely unlikely to be interested in Ikea prices and style. The Ikea design undoubtedly gives the apartment an international or, let’s say, global ambience. The local ingredient consists of a picturesque variety of municipal books that decorate the shelves in the apartment. These include books on Porto’s history and parishes, and will come in handy for my research...I’m in luck. The biblioteconomy and water painting catalogues may also prove to be useful because they’ll help me go to sleep whenever I’m bored at night.

On my first stroll through the districts of Paranhos and Arca d’Agua, I saw simple photocopied posters stuck with Sellotape to various lamp-posts, calling a general assembly meeting in February to set up the Movimento dos Utentes dos Transportes Públicos (Public Transport Users Movement). The city is, I suspect, still alive. Beyond the neighbourhood associations now dormant or silently replaced by Juntas de Freguesia (parish associations, the lowest or sub-municipal level of public administration), emerge other associations and groups with more liquid groups that form the social foundations to prevent us suffering vertigo at the vacancy of discourses offered by governing politicians. Another even more material foundation of Porto’s social life is public transport. And the one that shines brightest of all is the Metro!

Upon leaving Casa da Música station, I was joined by a Fiat mechanic who accompanied me for a while and told me that this magnificent transport complex was inaugurated about two years ago. He didn’t tell me much else, apart from complain that he was fed up with cars because his job was extremely repetitive and that times are tough if you want to change wheels. In his opinion, the best indicator of this crazy world was the high price of petrol. He didn’t say much, but he knew what he was talking about. On some metro stations I’ve have seen that there are still groups of operators conditioning access points and infrastructures. I was also surprised by the presence of many private security guards working for Prosegur (a company that operates throughout Spain, probably with Spanish or multinational capital), both on platforms and inside carriages. But everything is very clean, serene and aseptic, just as it is in the equally hyper-protected metro of Bilbao (where even eating in public is prohibited), no graffiti, posters or stickers, and not even hordes of people pushing and shoving to get in and out of the trains. To foster greater civil “self-control”, the unobstructed entrances have no turnstiles or reinforced barriers, just a couple of vertical posts on either side with the words “tickets”, leaving it up to users to be responsible and pay for their tickets, which cost 9 € for 10 trips, which is relatively cheap really (depending on what each person can afford of course).
But a metro’s a metro. What I mean is that a city with a metro creates so many mental maps for people to move about and make plans, find work, go out and leave their cars at home, or meet other people, that it represents a genuine qualitative leap in the living conditions of the urban population. Everything becomes much easier, and perhaps more anonymous and dense and exciting, but the metro makes me feel that life is faster and transmits a sense of modernity and a paradoxical sense of “technological humanisation” when I travel around cities that grow with a particular taste for chaos so adored by urban developers and metro-addicts.

When I see so few people on metro station platforms and in the train carriages, and when I compare the Porto metro system with those of other large cities like Madrid or Chicago, an omen comes to mind: in only a few years time, these stations and carriages will be jam packed with people, and the population of metro users, and probably residents from areas near the stations also, will grow enormously, pushing and shoving, saturating the system and mixing with one another. Why do people always claim that sociologists can’t make predictions?

In the afternoon, I returned home by metro and, Eureka!, the comboio was fairly full. It was rush hour I think but have no fear, more people will come, I am sure my prophecies will prove to be correct. I can also see that the metro lines now reach various borderline municipalities, including Maia, where the airport is located (despite the fact that the airport station has not been opened yet, and who knows, maybe it will be inaugurated simultaneously – politicians always love to have their photographs taken, even if it means having to smile in dust storm!). It’s like the backbone of the metropolitan area, Porto’s genuine “social” and popular skeleton because it would be strange if a minister – or rather, ceteris paribus, any other member of the upper class – could answer the classic question of how much a metro ticket costs.

I return home moved by the two films screened at the FLUP (Faculdade de Letras da Universidade do Porto - Faculty of Arts of the University of Porto), where I work: Sur la plage de Belfast (Henri-François Imbert, 2000) and Fleurette (Sérgio Tréfaut, 2002). I was moved in at least three senses: by the poetry and sociology oozing from those two, rather unconventional “documentaries”. In the first documentary, the director used a hand-held video camera to narrate a trip to Belfast to locate the people who appeared in a family recording. What is unusual is that Imbert found the recording by chance inside a second-hand video camera he had bought. It seems trivial but the simplicity of the scenes (the family swimming at the beach and an elderly lady showing a mirror as she steps out in the street from the doorstep of her house) and the director’s intuition that he may find something unexpected at the end of his quest make this a uniquely beautiful experience. Eleven years after those images of apparent relaxation had been recorded, the IRA declared a truce and the person who recorded the images had died. In the documentary, the family watches the simple twelve-minute recording of their past with a certain air of melancholy cum satisfaction, chat in the dining room and return to the same icy beach. Meanwhile, Imbert keeps recording and decides to appear for the first time in his own recording, once he has understood the moral left by the deceased author who had lead him there.

The second film is a long story of life in which Tréfaut interrogates his mother, mainly about her past and travels with her to the places where she had spent her life. This time, the director appears on screen from the beginning as the interviewer, prompting and extracting intimate confessions from his mother. On the surface, his mother seems to be just an elderly lady, aged around 80, who lives alone in Paris. As the tape runs, the reasons for her self-imposed solitude are gradually revealed by a person who has survived thanks to her silence and containment, although this does not suggest that she has led a miserable life. She tells her
surprised son over and over again that she did what she had to do, there’s nothing more to it, and he cannot believe all the secrets she gradually discloses for the first time in front of the cameras, which he has set up himself. He discovers, for example, that during her childhood she was a border at a nuns’ school and for many years she had no contact with her abusing father or her mother, who was committed to an asylum. Or that her first husband, whom she accompanied, collaborated with the occupying Nazi forces in France. Or the circumstances in which she fled alone with her three children from the dictatorship in Brazil after her eldest child was arrested and that her husband, a journalist and Communist Party militant, returned to Portugal after 25 April, before eventually leaving her once and for all.

The second reason why I spent such a long time in introspective mode was from the joy of discovering that the Instituto de Sociologia (Institute of Sociology) of the FLUP had organized this cycle of documentaries entitled “the construction of the real”. Shortly after these two films were screened, another sociology teacher showed the magnificent Goodbye Lenin (Wolfgang Becker, 2003). Yes, I know, they’re only fictional stories, not objective data, nor results of comparative scientific research or conferences by prestigious authorities in the field, but I suspect that the mental space they occupy is essential for stimulating the muscles of critical and intelligent reflection. That’s also one of the university’s functions, to study reality from all possible angles. If there is no prior enthusiasm for human problems, it is difficult for science to develop successfully and with an ethical concern for its consequences.

Thirdly, I asked myself whether it was worth pursuing these memoirs with such eloquent and dispersed ethnographic devotion. And what would be the point of me filming the life of my own family, of returning to the village, to the cities where I or my parents chose to live? Reliving family or personal miseries? It’s too terrible a vacuum to resolve by aesthetic methods alone, although I’m sure that the exercise would also allow me to relive moments of happiness and freedom. A sceptical consequence: could it be that politics and sociology are just my personal hideaways, places where I can retreat to without feeling burdened by the past? Or “pasts”: acquaintances, strangers and people we don’t want to recognise.

So, to the funny anecdote of the day: an advert in the newspaper Público read “Abertura e reparação de cofres por técnicos especializados e responsáveis. Cofres de parede e monobloco. Portas blindadas. Fechaduras de alta segurança. Deslocação para todo o País.” (I’ve never understood why, after these types of claims, the presenter always has to say the same thing: “No comment”).

14 March 2006

Yesterday I continued to explore the city. Reading some history books and articles in various social science journals has opened my eyes further. It’s a curious way of discovering cities: first you “read” about them, then you go out to confirm in situ what you’ve read. Of course, what you find has little to do with scholars’ tales. I fix my gaze on the chipped tiles, on the abundant ruins or simple ageing of many buildings, on the people leaning out of their windows, taking their children to school, chatting on the doorsteps of small food stores. I discover that the avocados are cheap, at 1.50 € per kilo, but that other fruit and vegetables aren’t as cheap. The grocer, a very friendly lady, insists and asks me whether I need anything else. At the kiosk halfway between my house and Salgueiros metro station, people stop to leaf through magazines and talk football.
At a Lidl supermarket, I discover that there are only shopping trolleys and no baskets. This encourages me to buy more than I need; I didn’t need much encouragement because we are all driven to behave like this by excessive inertia, and the undesired effect is that we reach the check-out counter with our arms full of things we never intended to buy. To be honest, I’ve always found these places to be a little comical. It’s a shame that I almost never take photographs of these types of scenes or situations. Perhaps I’ll hurt the feelings of the people in the picture, I think to myself. How do professionals go about it? I ask myself the same question over and over again.

Just as on my other two visits to Porto, I end up in the Utopia bookshop on Praça da República. Apart from anarchist and general alternative publications, with many titles in Spanish, it gives me the chance to look through old books on Porto and Portugal. First, I went to the city centre down a truly inhuman road, polluted and noisy due to the thousands of people fleeing from the centre in their cars to their pleasant homes in the suburbs. This is Faria Guimarães street and I don’t think I’ll ever walk along that road again. In contrast, the yellow line of the metro follows it like a more artificial yet more breathable alternative, however hard that is to believe (even the cement in the metro tunnels is lit and glows a silvery grey because it’s so new!). Trying to slip away from that lead-intoxicating experience, I walked to the Lapa Church/Hospital. According to the books I’d read, this was the resting place of the heart – embalmed I presume - of some aristocratic noble, who donated it - after his death I presume - to the courageous citizens of Porto for their commitment to one of history’s many battles, the struggle for freedom, which is probably the root of most conflicts.

As I forgot to take a map with me so as not to arouse suspicion about my real role as a professional gossiper, I didn’t realise I’d reached Praça da República until I stumbled across it. The soldier I saw standing upright in front of an official-looking building, almost like one of the guards at Buckingham Palace, reminded me of an inscription next to the swimming pool in Valença where I go every week with my children: it reads “Morte aos Tenentes” (literally, “death to lieutenants”). Evidently, it was a statement by some far right group against the military responsible for the coup d’état that triggered the Carnation Revolution and lead to the introduction of a representative democracy in Portugal. I suspect that the extreme left, or at least the libertarian left that is, will also continue the anti-militarist tradition of mistrusting military institutions, and on this geoidiological point it would probably be fairly correct to say that “extremes touch”. However, it’s clear that the military and repressive institutions have been a delicate issue in Portugal, precisely because of their prominent role in that revolution, something unique in Portuguese history. A few years ago, the most conservative and reactionary minister in central government, Paulo Portas, who was the direct architect of the government’s defence portfolio, declared that it was now time to invest seriously in weapons and salaries for the army because the army was the laughing stock of all military forces. This was followed shortly after by the exposure of a network of corrupt traffic police – GNR, a semi-military group, similar to the Spanish Guardia Civil –which reduced the fines of victims if they paid the fines on the spot without going to the traffic department office, i.e. to avoid all those bothersome and confusing bureaucratic formalities when they also give you a bill that you never know where to keep.

Herculano, the bookshop attendant at Utopia, told me how to get to the office of a group called Ilheus. To get there, I had to walk along the whole of Bonjardim street, leaving behind the Câmara (City Hall), cross the Praça da Trindade and Cedofeita street until I was again back where I started. By 20:30 that evening I thought I’d gone round in one big circle! To convince myself of the usefulness of my intrepid voyage, I took some photographs of anti-war
and anti-Bush graffiti on *Travesia de Cedofeita*, just before the main shopping street of the same name, and which is actually full of shoe shops. There, I asked some elderly women how to get to the *Junta de Freguesia de Massarelos*, just to ask something and escape from my self-inflicted autism. But after several minutes of listening to complex, cognitive explanations - each lady felt her recommended route was the quickest –, we all reached the conclusion that at that time of day it would be closed. So, after the obligatory smiles, I asked them where the nearest metro station was. Note how long and drawn out the previous sentence was - I just want to show you how difficult it was to end that conversation. Of course, I had to endure their farewells and equally friendly instructions about how to get to the metro station.

Back on *La República* street, I saw a shop selling food products imported from China. I was overcome by that absurd nostalgia of a vast world I had only visited for two weeks in my life and I started to look around after picking up a bottle of “tamari” (soya sauce) to overcome my shyness. I was thrilled to find so many exotic products, with Chinese letters everywhere and thin stickers with minimal translations, but I was almost scared to buy more than the basics I needed for supper and breakfast - tofu, bamboo, a mix of oats and almonds, sesame seed sticks and a kilo of cashew nuts without salt for the cheap price of 9 euros. I was accompanied all the time by a store attendant who could only pronounce some basic words in Portuguese and some other words in English, in a vain attempt to be of assistance. Although I took advantage of the occasion to ask her things about the city’s Chinese community, she could only tell me about spicy and other sauces, so I gave up. The lady at the cash desk was a Geisha-Matahari type and seemed to be the owner of the shop. Without budging an eyebrow, she told me that the fresh tofu cost one euro. I forced another smile and walked briskly to the bus stop. I slipped my “Andante” card through the magnetic reader and went home to watch the news.

After these initial misfortunes, I was able to start charting hypotheses in my ethnographic research. My first hypothesis, for example, was that I had already detected the presence of Spanish on several occasions. Today’s *Jornal de Notícias* even reports on the demand of students in a secondary-school class in Espinho for Spanish as a second language. There are many reasons for this, but I can highlight the following three: the desire to continue their studies at Spanish universities; the desire to work in Spanish companies based in Portugal; and the desire to improve their poor knowledge of Spanish – *portunhol* – which they have inherited from the community of Galicians, many of them their grandparents or parents, who have gradually settled in the area since the early 20\(^{th}\) Century. Of course, English is not shunned. Buses carry signs saying “Running on natural gas” in the same format and size as “*Movido a gás natural*”. On the metro, official inscriptions and stations are announced in both languages. I have no idea how many Erasmus students speak Spanish and English as their mother tongues, but I have already noted the presence of both species at the university. So, I feel comfortable once again.

In the season of documentaries, today the organisers once again scored a winner. The selected films were *Les Maîtres-Fous* (Jean Rouch, 1955) and *És a nossa fe* (Edgar Pêra, 2004). Since I’ve not yet mentioned the pseudo-debate that tends to take place between the two organisers, trying their hardest to appeal to the audience, I will now make up for that with gusto.

The first is a classic and prized anthropological documentary. It was directed by an engineer who lived a quasi-voluntary exile in French colonies in Western Africa to overcome the trauma of the world war. In this documentary, he tells the story of a group of poor urban workers who emigrated from rural areas and from other countries near the Golden Coast, and
how they join a type of sect and participate in a cathartic ceremony. On one vacation, they
visit a country house where one of the sect’s spiritual fathers organises an unusual ceremony
to summon the Gods of the Haouka sect to possess the bodies of those who have suffered
some misfortune, such as sexual impotence, humiliation, madness, etc. In fact, the film team
witnesses an intense session in which some of the participants enter into a trance, pretend to
be colonials (soldiers, mainly), sacrifice and devour animals, with saliva spilling from their
mouths, their eyes wide open, making spasmodic and epileptic movements, and with a termite
mound serving as a totem and representing the “governor”. The narrator translates and
describes what he records on film and does not intervene or ask any questions, he just looks
on. As he becomes infected with the same rhythm of the ceremony during the entire film, and
using English and French expressions to designate the “theatre” which he invites us to visit,
he highlights the constant, sceptic irony of the western observer. At the end he shows us the
people who had been in a trance during the ceremony - a face worker, a longshoreman, a
pickpocket, a soldier - back at work in the city, quietly and happily going about their daily
routines.

In fact, he urges us to accept a hypothesis in the purest style of functionalist theory: what
hidden medicine do these “wild” rituals contain to make their participants return to
“normality”? In other words, won’t we eventually need to let ourselves go in order to
integrate, without saying a word, in the dominant current of society? That question does not
criticise “normal” life, integration and social cohesion but rather civilisation which represses
any space for trance, catharsis and visiting the beyond. Fortunately, the documentary suggests
that this induction to momentary madness is a curious spectacle in which not everyone
participates to the same degree and that even anecdotes of “reality”, such as the awareness
that they have to return rented cars before nightfall to avoid being charged the night rate, are
juxtaposed with the other elements of the trance and the supposed elimination of ills.

The second documentary does not even have a narrator off camera. The filming, montage,
atmospheric sounds and music juggle with all types of analogies. The documentary has a
frantic and fragmentary rhythm. It focuses on highlighting the religious and military
appearance of football fans. To achieve this, the camera hones in on the fans’ faces, their
chants, clothes and picnics on the stands, while they travel by bus to matches, climb trees
around stadiums, sit and stand on the terraces, wave flags, listen to the radio, buy their team’s
flags and scarves, paint their faces and hair in their team’s colours thus swearing allegiance to
the cause, shout insulting comments, go to matches with their children, jump with joy, break
fences, cry when they lose, and wrap themselves in flags. The ironies are even more evident,
blatant and recurrent in this documentary. Pêra is just as much of an atheist as Rouch, but he
does not simply reject that grotesque spectacle and also shows us some cathartic moments.
The main event is a match between Leixões and Sporting Clube. One team wears red and
white while the other team’s kit is green. The fans take up positions under those colours,
unfurl their banners and flags, and make waves on the terraces. This aesthetic backdrop of
contrasting colours is simply another game of irrational emotions that flow through the
masses.

What seemed most interesting to me about the film was precisely the director’s refusal to
interview some individuals representative of these experiences. Nor does he give excessive
protagonism to the actual football match, it’s almost the least important element. If this is a
collective phenomenon, it must be understood from the standpoint of its collective dimension,
the common experience of all the individuals involved, what happens when these individuals
meet and behave in that way, their intrinsic diversity, what happens before, during and after
matches, the rituals, the fans locked in a trance. The author seems to be telling us that these fans may be fanatical but they quietly return to work the day after the match. But what is sure is that our society is rotten through and through, before, during and after consuming the latest drug in fashion, carefully manufactured throughout history (press cuttings, images of historical football heroes, the participation of politicians ... this helps them present these ideas in the actual documentary). In this case, the ironies are superlative yet subtle: heavenly music and balloons with the colours of each team rising to the sky, neo-Nazi flags and policemen lined up on the tarmac of the athletics field around the football pitch, a lady wearing a green scarf around her head like a religious veil and meditating while her rosary prayers merge with the murmur of the crowd before a goal.

Today’s moral: it is not really worth my while interviewing some representatives of the phenomena that I’m studying in Porto – citizen participation in urban planning matters. What I must not do is lose sight of the whole process, its possibility conditions, all the aspects involved in its development, the most important aspects for future life in the city, the moments of fury and gathering emotions or sensibilities or strengths. I cannot take for granted the ingenious claim that everything in life is perfect, that its anomia are necessary, or, conversely, that everything is the sum of different points of view. But I must search for the right language to translate all this, I can’t allow the people I want to use in my research to scoff at such abstractions. Phew! At least this overtly subjective story still seems to be on time, coming in the last minute of stoppage time, just in time to save some baggage for the progress of social science from being washed away in the flood.

29 March 2006

Once I asked my architecture students to “drift” around Vigo. I basically told them that they should let themselves be surprised by what happened to them during the day, to keep their eyes wide open, to pay attention to the most unsuspected details, and use any excuse to participate in any conversation or event. The limit depended on the goal I proposed, passing through more or less arbitrary points. I don’t remember them reading the theory books I gave them in any great detail before the exercise, and they were fairly short come to think of it. Nor did they make many connections between the built-up environment and what people were doing, saying and transmitting. Much less did they acquire a poetic purpose from drifting around the city, focusing on analogies, repetitions, singularities and contradictions, on their own questions, and on their own existence. But I know that the experience left its mark on some of them.

With the passing of the years, I feel more comfortable about going on these types of urban treks alone. Paradoxically, they allow you to penetrate an external environment. You walk around the streets, you don’t set yourself fixed routes, you mess around by pretending to look inquisitively at the urban landscape, the walls, the windows, the stickers on the lamp-posts, engaging in conversation, contemplating the beauty andcrudeness of things. You walk around in circles several times along the same route you’ve memorised, but every time you widen the circle, you venture into other streets just to do something different, you zigzag to see what happens, or you try to walk at different paces, sometimes looking at shop windows, on other occasions trying to look as if you were on an errand with an important message. First of all, of course, you start in the neighbourhood where you live or in the building where you work. Then, any reason will do to explore other parts of the city. I don’t believe that this is the best or only way to gather sociological knowledge, but for me it’s essential so that I can get an
insight into ways of life, to weave a maze of meanings and emotions that then allow me to interpret other information more deeply and accurately.

So, what’s the reason for this theoretical-vanguard *excursus*? There isn’t one really. Let me explain. I haven’t progressed very much on my latest jaunts. I even make calculations and I’ve discovered that I spend more time in the library and on the computer than snooping around the suburbs. But some things lead to others, and vice-versa. However, and purists will object, you shouldn’t lose track of what you are trying to study. So, let’s look at some of the anecdotes I have to tell.

While leafing through the sociology journal published by the FLUP, I came across a study on the English community and its survival in the city over the centuries, with its distinctive rituals, private clubs, endogamic marriages and pride of the British passport. The more I read, the more I had the feeling that I was wasting time, that my official job had nothing to do with that, that it was only a scholarly vice for me to rub shoulders with other intellectuals. In short: I felt a sense of guilt. In a study of one neighbourhood in the historical centre, the Vitória district, an Anglicism reappeared that had already made me suspicious: “snack-bars.” According to the author, Virgilio Borges Pereira, these are bars that offer fast food, drinks without conversation, individuals or, at most, couples taking over a semi-public, semi-private space. They are something like the symbol of (post)modernity, replacing traditional cafés and *tascas* (cheap bars) where almost exclusively men used to meet for long periods, drink and talk in groups. What I still don’t know is why the term “snack-bar” has been adopted. Or why so many people say “OK” instead of the more colloquial “tá bem” in local jargon. In any case, not all the snack bars have “fast-food” atmospheres; it depends a lot on the time of day, on the customers and on the mood of the waiters. Back to the connections, it happens that the author of that study was born in the same year as me and has devoted his life’s work to urban sociology with similar enthusiasm. While I chatted to him I felt as if I were talking to my double, but only to a certain extent of course (I don’t know if he had the same feeling!). This was particularly true when he told me how his parents had taken him to the demonstration on 1 May 1974, at the height of the Carnation Revolution, and suddenly images of the streets of Madrid came to mind, full of political propaganda during the first referendums after Franco’s death (unfortunately that day nobody made any public demonstration of joy for my parents to take me to!).

On the same subject, i.e. toing and froing about what I’d come here to study, I discovered that the director of the *Instituto de Sociologia* (present in almost all the documentary sessions) was a militant of the *Bloco de Esquerdas* (the coalition of parties furthest “left” of the Socialist Party now in government, although I wouldn’t know how to define them with respect to the traditional Communist Party, the PCP, which, according to the latest bunch of information filtered to the press, obtained more than 3,000 new members last year). On one of my strolls with a fixed destination (the *Utopia* bookshop once again!), I fortuitously passed by the *Praça da Galiza* and, a little later, on *Torrinha* street, the headquarters of the *Bloco de Esquerdas*, a modest premises overlooking the street. What surprised me most was a printed traffic sign prohibiting anyone who was not a *Bloco de Esquerdas* member from parking there, although it looked like it had been placed there by the party itself and not by the city council.

Wandering off my chosen path from time to time, I discovered a huge number of ruined buildings and others up for sale on many streets in the city centre. There was new graffiti on the walls: “A imitação dos herois é o hábito sagrado dos cadáveres enterritos”, “no quedan razones para matar, todas han muerto” (“there are no more reasons to kill, all are dead”) (the
latter, in Spanish, was by the CEDOFETA association), “cada dia como se fosse o primeiro...”, “abril é revolução!”, “em novembro é de abril e maio que me lembro”, “a mulher não é uma cona!”... Earlier, on one of these urban wastelands, a type of no-mans-land used as a university car park by the FLUP and the FAUP (the Faculty of Architecture), and where a municipal policeman spends all day watching over the cars (although his job of “participative observation” doesn’t seem very tiring, I must admit, because he doesn’t have to take notes or anything, but that one morning I saw him set on a young man who he accused of sniffing around the cars to steal something), I discovered other provocative inscriptions: “o crime compensa”, “procura-se suspeito de ser professor de urbanística T/2260”.

While reading a study about resident associations in Porto, written by Helena Vilaça (my hostess on my first day at the Sociology Department), I expected to find references to 25 April everywhere. And, in addition to numerous information and analyses, one appendix included jewels of political literature such as the following: “Errar é próprio de quem não tem experiência, e a crítica quando não é destrutiva é útil, por isso critica a direcção para ajudares a construir a nossa Associação.” (Ass. da Bouça, bairro do Alerta); “A associação de moradores é a organização que or povo criou. O povo organizado autonomamente conquistará tudo a que tem direito” (Ass. de Massarelos). This last phrase appeared in a comic strip, very much in the style of the Situationists (the same ones who encouraged the so-called “drift”) with the background silhouette of the building called the “Frigorífico do Peixe”, which was occupied then and still is now. In my opinion, the building has a very rationalist design. But I was most struck by the curved forms that resolve the corners of so many buildings I had seen in different parts of the city.

This time the coincidences mounted up in my life. That same afternoon, I drove past the abovementioned building (already fairly ferruginous) as I drove behind Paula Viana, my contact at Afrontamento publishers, who took me to her house. Over dinner, she told me she knew the president of the Massarelos Association, a lady who I wanted to interview of course. What she didn’t tell me was that she also knew the owner of the Utopia bookshop One week later, I arranged to meet her in front of that shop, where I had of course not just found books on the Carnation Revolution but more importantly one entitled “Livro Branco do SAAL”, which had been Helena Vilaça’s main source of information in her study of residents associations. It was a beautiful antique, but I didn’t see much point in hauling around such a large book just for it to collect dust on my bookcase. And that’s bearing in mind the experience of the SAAL (Serviços Ambulatórios de Apoio Local) medical services, which, in my humble opinion, represent a real achievement in cooperation between mobilized populations and experts geared to providing accessible homes to the most needy.

Now I’d truly satisfied three of my goals: my academic inquisitiveness, my curiosity and my perplexities. Another precise and exact phrase stood out in the bulletin in that appendix, possibly polycopied at some semi-undercover printers: “As casas construídas a custa do povo devem pertencer ao povo”. This reminded me of a poem by Bertolt Brecht: “Who built the seven gates of Thebes? The books are filled with names of kings. Was it kings who hauled the craggy blocks of stone?”

After achieving harmony, all you have to do is undo it and get lost again. Otherwise, everything would be too easy. I have to admit that on some mornings I pick up my calendar and replan everything I have to do. I think about what Michael Burawoy said today at a magnificent conference he gave at the FLUP on the “revisiting” of ethnographic studies, and that was just what I needed: in the United States, sociology is “big business”, that’s why
almost nobody has either the time or the inclination to revisit places they’ve already been to, and they often don’t even bother to engage in positive structuralist and committed ethnography in a social sense (Burawoy said that this was his preferred theoretical framework, and who am I to disagree with him). Then I realised that even eliminating all the time I waste (although of course I often don’t have defined working days, which I mention in my defence just in case this falls into the hands of one of my superiors!), I would not finish the study by the set deadline. And that sets my mind at rest.

I returned to the Chinese shop to buy some tofu. I then took the same bus by mistake, but the ticket collector didn’t accept my Andante bus pass. I drank some more mint and lemon infusions at the student bar. I went back to the seminar on documentaries. I wasn’t in any hurry, everything would be more prolific that way, I tell myself with a certain sense of autohypnosis.

While chatting to the anarchist bookstore owner, I composed a route around Porto’s first and second-hand bookshops. Meanwhile, I discovered that he had just designed a leaflet on the astronomical increase in prices on the metro line that has now replaced the railway line he used to take to return to his home in Vila do Conde, on the outskirts of the city. He told me that he was involved in one of the platforms in support of public transport. The metro continues to fascinate me. In Tuesday’s edition of Público, I read the results of a survey among 1,300 users. Most of them were satisfied of course, saving on petrol and changing their mental maps of the city. However, the survey revealed that most metro users were middle or upper class, although it’s anyone’s guess as to the questions used in the survey to determine the class of the participants. Anyway, I’ve asked around and it’s true that some metro stations are quite a distance from many of the city’s social districts (including large parts of the run-down historical centre).

Inspired by another article in Sunday’s Jornal de Notícias, I composed a new route to explore the city, this time based on the theme of the emerging reggae culture in Porto and the neighbouring area. At night, when I took the metro to my first reggae night at the Klínika pub, I witnessed a scene that I suppose is quite plausible: a group of four youngsters, not older than 18, and fairly dark, were surrounded by four security guards, two policemen, four metro employees and one cleaning lady who happened to be passing by. As is often the case in such situations, I stared at them to make sure they knew they were being watched and nobody stepped over the mark, but I moved away when my train came because any problems seemed to have been sorted out. The policemen seemed to be tenser, reprimanding and scolding the youngsters while asking them for their names and telephone and identity numbers. The youngsters had clearly not bought tickets, and it doesn’t surprise me because I’ve already said that the clean and obstacle-free entrances at metro stations are an open invitation for such pranks. I have even forgotten to pass my Andante pass over the ticket scanner on more than one occasion. The metro workers seemed to be issuing the youngsters with paper tickets, now relics of the past, although I wouldn’t be surprised if they were actually fines. One of the youths laughed and moved nervously from side to side, perhaps to conceal or contain his rage. When I moved away, I even saw him light up a cigarette in an excess of confidence, inducing another warning from some of the officers around him. The youths were clearly outnumbered. Why do they take so much pleasure in punishing minor misdemeanours like that (if it was a minor misdemeanour that is, because I’ve often seen people smoking in stations)? How much intentionality was there in that “duel” to teach lifelong discipline, create a stigma and turn an individual into a criminal just because he wanted to save a little of the little he has, or test what’s prohibited, the rules, public property, without harming anyone?
The concert at the Klínika pub started more than one hour later than advertised. That should have annoyed me, but it didn’t. I found a good place to relax and write a poem to an imaginary lover. On my way home after the gig, I walked along the same route as the bus; now we were partners in crime. It was a humid night, but all was well, just like in those sleepy villages on the shores of the Mediterranean.

26 April 2006

I hadn’t been keeping my logbook up-to-date recently but I told myself that that was always a good sign: it was a sign that I was busy on many different fronts, so there was no time for melancholy. Yesterday was a historical day. I admit that the ghost of the Portuguese Revolution has always intrigued me and to satisfy my curiosity even more I decided to spend the bank holiday in the city.

In the morning, I rode to the Parque da Cidade and Foz districts on my bicycle to visits every nook and cranny, mix with the people and read. The park is spectacular, beautiful, full of winding paths and remnants of ruins or new buildings, like a type of Museu da Água, brimming with suggestions. The land it occupies was included in development plans back the late 1960s, but it was left unattended and brambles started to grow among the orchards. That was until Manuel Costa Lobo’s project was approved in 1984. As you can see, in Portugal these things take time, exacerbating many and disheartening others.

Of the remaining activists, last week I interviewed two who belong to a civil platform that had defended one part of this green area for several years against the plans to build homes designed by the prestigious firm owned by the architect Souto de Moura. They even obtained signatures to call for a referendum, but the threat eventually evaporated with the change of municipal government. The results can be seen in situ in some parts of the Park which look like no-man’s-land zones, undeveloped, not even in green and ash grey. One hill offers mesmerizing views of the sea. The view is even more enticing if you look through the stonework arches, although I do not know if these are authentic or simulated ruins.

Moving down towards the coast, the park’s paths converge at the same point where the river and ocean kiss, the Castelo do Queijo. This area also lies on the border with the municipality of Matosinhos and just not to be left out it is also home to another unfinished project languishing and eternally forgotten: the so-called “transparent building”. One article in today’s Jornal de Notícias slammed the poor state of that building, intended to complete the work of Sola Morales on the sea front, but I was intrigued that it didn’t mention the added mystery of the other ruins standing a few metres away, with the inscription on the front of the “Colégio Luso-Internacional do Porto”.

The atmosphere was very relaxed, typical of any warm, sunny day in spring. It was also a bank holiday for almost everyone (I saw a few gardeners working, and the bars were open, as was a Pingo Doce supermarket on Boavista). The park was actually quite full – in some parts there were many adults playing football with kids, who I expect were their children. There were also passers-by and cyclists. This is ideal place for the Portuguese to engage in their favourite sport: picnicking (although some say this is past-time is disappearing very quickly). It is also the ideal setting to engage in the increasingly universal fashion of taking photographs of absolutely everything. Of course, observers can only go unnoticed if they do
exactly the same thing as their prey. So, I took out my picnic, took some photographs and set about reading the newspaper and finishing “La Soledad era esto” by Juan José Millás while keeping one eye on the balls whizzing from one side to another.

Millás describes the life of a woman who had been a rebel and revolutionary in her youth but who, with the passing of the years, gradually became a member of the bourgeois together with her husband, who worked as an advisor in the corrupt political system. She smoked hashish and drank compulsively. She suffered intestinal disorders and the recent death of her mother plunged her into a state of suffocating introspection. She anonymously contracted a detective to spy on her husband but immediately preferred to be the investigator herself and thus obtain a different point of view of the ups and downs of her own life. Finally, she reached the conclusion that she needed to leave her husband and start a new life, not like the life she had led when she was young, but a little less miserly than the one she had led until then. As if by some magical, psychosomatic cure all her pain disappeared as soon as she embarked on her transformation, the detective’s findings and observations helping her enormously to create her new identity.

With these ideas swimming around in my head, I went to D. João I square, next to Avenida de los Aliados, where the 25 April festivities take place. I was surprised that almost nobody was dancing to the music being played by the groups on stage. Nor was there much political or other propaganda, with the exception of two small stalls, one set up by the Bloco de Esquerdas and another belonging to the anarchists. The three or four thousand people in the square were only talking, greeting each other and looking at one another or in the direction of the stage. In Sá de Bandeira street I recognised the old theatre, which was now a cinema showing only pornographic films. Next to the square, a shoe shop had taken advantage of the occasion to open for business. As was to be expected, people were walking through the crowd selling red carnations and pop corn (the pop corn of peace, I presume, but very sweet indeed). Everything unfolded in a very peaceful, calm atmosphere, but the people in the park and on the beach were the ones having most fun.

This was more like a meeting of nostalgia lovers, albeit with the testimonial presence of some young people. What was unusual was the general consensus in Portugal regarding the legacy of that famous revolution. This reference does not hurt anybody and can be perfectly combined with other arguments against fascism and in favour of existing legislation, as the banner at the back of the stage proclaims: “25 April. Defend and ensure respect for the Constitution”. I also spotted another provocative banner in the demonstration beforehand: “Não apaguem a memoria!”. To mark the event, the president spoke at the Assembly of the Portuguese Republic about “social inclusion” and in the evening a female sociologist and colleague of mine said that she had spent the day explaining things about that date to her eight-year-old son. I couldn’t stop asking myself how many of the characters in Millás’s novel were present in each place I had visited that day, either for work or pleasure, but what does it matter at this point in my career.

9 May 2006

I returned home and immediately put on some John Coltrane songs I’d stored on my laptop computer. On Sunday night I made a real mistake by persisting with Manu Chao at home after driving from Tui with his steamy live record blaring out in the car (a pirated copy, but what can I do, I don’t think he’ll be too bothered). Of course, its impossible to concentrate that
way, even to read some stories about love and estrangement by García Calvo. So, I quickly changed to Astor Piazzola, Ben Webster and Billie Holiday, who appear in that alphabetical order in the jazz section on my laptop, and I didn’t feel like preparing an exquisite mix for the weekend (Friday night was punk (Dakidarria) and ska (Kogito) night at a concert in Vigo in support of the “Salvemos Monteferro” platform). That’s why I couldn’t go wrong with Coltrane at that time of night, immersed in my state of acute sensitivity. I’m a little sad that I have to miss the Matosinhos Jazz Festival next week because Portugal has some consolidated jazz circuits, albeit slightly intellectualised and snobby, but they have a clear post-modern feel, hybrids of light and shadow, with the rhythms of Fernando Pessoa and Grândola Vila Morena beating underneath.

I beavered away and continued to collect real gems on my urban travels. In the metro, I jotted down a warning on a book of poems by Molina Foix. The warning was written in bright red on the platforms: “Proibido atravessar. Perigo de morte”. What was unusual was that a few yards away the warning was translated into English as follows: “Danger. Do not cross”. And I asked myself the following question. Is the danger only fatal for Portuguese citizens? Now isn’t that a little funny!? Well, wait for this one: can you imagine thousands of university students wearing the oldest and gloomiest clothes possible, all in black, with capes and equally ministerial zipped document folders, and also many wearing university minstrel band uniforms, deployed like a Martian army around the city (remember Mars Attacks anyone?). To be honest, I’d seen them at the FLUP since I arrived in March. I had no idea what they did, but I became curious and started to investigate and take photographs of them from a distance. So, it came as a great surprise when one day at one of their homes a couple turned round and even posed for me smiling. This was clearly a sign that they were proud of their ritual exploits. This was part of several months’ preparation for the Queima das Fitas (“Burning of the Ribbons” ceremony).

My friend Paula Viana, who is a real open book, explained everything to me today very clearly: there is only one city more reactionary than Porto in relation to such exhibitions of sacramental elitism: Braga. When she studied at the university, these customs, which had been imported from the oldest university in the country (Coimbra), were abolished; this was, of course, during the first few years after 25 April. But they were soon restored. The academic robe costs and arm and a leg and not everyone can afford it. However, I reckoned I’d seen at least 25% of the FLUP staff wearing these uniforms. At the shop Capas Negras, situated in Praça da República, I noticed that the female uniforms were not cheaper than 105€ (excluding shirt, stockings or emblems, so add another 121€) and men’s garments were more expensive at 155€ (plus 171€ for the extras mentioned previously). Add shoes (25€ for men and 35€ for women) or the famous “pasta” (leather folio-sized case with a zipper), so add another 30€. These are prices for products in viscose; 100% polyester products are slightly cheaper. And I wonder whether they buy more than one uniform or whether they pass them onto their brothers and sisters. However, it’s true that they use the uniforms for almost three months at all hours of the day, which I am sure means lots of stains, washing and replacements. The business must be lucrative because the shop I came across specialized in these products, and it looked like business was good. One day I visited the Faculty of Engineering. While waiting for the professor/activist I was going to interview, I was perplexed to see some “flyers” informing that another factory also offered the same academic clothing for the whole country at similar prices.

My intuition told me that all this paraphernalia was ridiculous and elitist, and only made the graduates stand out as somehow privileged and untouchable with respect to the rest of the
population. Paula told me I was right. I sighed obligingly, I was already beginning to think that this weirdo had very little to tell the locals, hiding behind his lenses designed to filter myths and rituals. Curiously, one of today’s free newspapers, Metro, published a column reporting that unemployment figures had increased most among graduates. This was linked to the prices of university registration fees in the public system which are three times higher than those in Spain. For example, PhD students must pay 2,500 € per year, and that’s before attending a single class. But the institutionalization of student associations in the Academic Federation and this apparently innocent game of maintaining the tradition of copying other university students and showing non-students that they have achieved “university” status, seem alien to the economic shambles of the university system.

The Queima das Fitas ceremony lasts for one week, from Sunday to Sunday. Interesting concert festivals are organized in the Parque da Cidade and a comparsa (musical group) plays around the city (this is called a “cortejo”), when each Faculty decorates cars and vans with coloured ribbons. This is a graduation ceremony for students completing three years at university (before it was called, once again in good old English style, the “Bachillerato”). However, what I don’t understand is why they’ve spent three months teaching freshers military songs and marches in the patios of the FLUP, in the pure US Army style. I’m not going to describe this in any more detail because that’s not what I came here to study, but, hey, there you have it, look at what ended up attracting my attention!

In previous weeks, I’ve actually tried to be more persistent with my research targets and subjects. The engineering teacher, Armando Herculano, told me how he had gradually rallied a movement of railway users who used the Vila do Conde-Póvoa de Varzim line. The movement questioned the alleged benefits of replacing the railway with the metro in terms of time, price and comfort. After thousands of millions of euros spent on developing the line, the benefit is five minutes less travelling time and tickets several euros more expensive, for a distance of approximately forty kilometres. What a let down! I’ll have to limit my praise to metro lines over shorter distances. Armando showed me documents, blogs, emails exchanged with the metropolitan authorities and the laboratory of electromechanical transformers where he works (his practical students keep on interrupting us, to my utter desperation), confirming that he was both an informed and meticulous person.

I had the same experience during my interview with Ana Borge, the technical coordinator and president of the Associação de Moradores de Massarelos (Massarelos Residents Association). Finally, I was able to enter that occupied monster I had so much respect for. What a surprise it was to find it full of kids from the infant school, some coloured walls and everything else fairly empty, desolate, like a chest containing echoes from the past. The association is half dead and now devotes its attention to children’s activities, managing a cooperative of properties that took more than ten years to build (I expect to test the stamina of the people who excitedly signed up for homes, but the fact is that, as I mentioned before, everything in Portugal gets done very, very slowly) and waiting for the new owners of the properties to rehouse them in more modest accommodation because they have reached an agreement whereby they cannot be simply evicted, particularly after everything the community has fought for. However, the community has aged and its members have fled to other municipalities where accommodation is cheaper and have forgotten that the association even exists. Therefore, either my research was going to sink in these waters or I would simply have to go elsewhere to find survivors of this civil movement.
Thanks to teachers from the Department of Sociology such as Virgílio Borges Pereira and Paula Guerra, I am gradually moving closer to housing cooperatives, social districts and the experience of participation in Campanhã’s neighbourhoods. But I preferred to take the least direct route because sometimes this is often the one that shows you why there is one that is more direct, quicker and better-known. So, I asked Paula Viana to accompany me on my journey to discover Porto’s social districts. Our route started in the neighbourhoods of Leixo and Pasteleira, in the vicinity of Massarelos and Lordelo. The first thing I learned from her was that it is very easy to ask people if they mind having their photograph taken in natural poses and up close. In fact, the first group of gypsies we came across did not object at all to having their photos taken. This was not the case, however, when we asked a skinny young man, who immediately came up to our car and threatened to steal our camera, accusing us of working for the police, something which my clumsy Spanish accent and Paula’s reconciling words cleared up in unison. He seemed to control the wheeling and dealing in the area, and walked away victorious and proud because he’d shown us this was his patch. Although there are some fairly luxurious properties close to this neighbourhood, it’s clear that many streets are only open to residents. Exclusion is also self-exclusion, because it’s better for some traffickers’ drug business.

None of the public spaces in this neighbourhood or in many of the social districts we visited later were in good condition. Virtually none of the shops or parks were well kept. However, every year the municipal magazines I read in the library continually praise the numerous urban rehabilitation projects underway in these districts and the almost total elimination of shanty towns in the city. But the peeling walls, rubbish, empty ground floors of buildings, the windows and balconies overflowing with junk and the presumably tiny size of many of these properties, do not suggest that these quarters can be platforms for greater prosperity of their populations.

Many of these “social” real estate developments were also initially built for “urgent” and “transitory” purposes. This transitory nature has become just another paradox of our societies, but it is a perennial issue. It is always more urgent to provide accommodation to someone who lives in a hut or wants to escape poverty or an “ilha” in the unhealthy rear patios of certain buildings than to tear down run-down buildings carrying the sarcastic label of provisional accommodation on their entrances and which are home to hundreds of housing problems. As long as they don’t protest …

Cooperatives such as Massarelos or SACHE in Aldoar, or the council flats for rent where I am living at the moment, are at the opposite end of this extremely broad spectrum of social housing characteristic of all parts of the city’s freguesias (parishes), since they have been awarded numerous prizes for their architectural quality and seem to have been touched by a magic wand that combines austerity with aesthetic dignity. When you live in a building with “aesthetic dignity”, I think it’s easy to convince yourself that you have other “moral” dignities. What must be harder to accept is discovering every morning that your neighbours live in luxurious homes and earn huge salaries, safely surrounded by insurmountable visible and invisible walls. These striking comparisons between neighbouring social districts with “high standing” family homes only a few metres away (in Lordelo or in La Foz, for example, but also in parts of the historical centre such as Miragaia or La Sé, where the estate agents offer a number of refurbished attics with indoor swimming pools at multi-million euro prices), can be found elsewhere in the city and create a type of interclassist landscape if observed from a blurry distance, although they are very often segregated at ground level where the marks of isolation are established in each built-up industrial estate.
I’ve just returned from the Botanical Gardens. I’d spent days staring at that endless explosion of roses and regretted not having brought any home. However, an English couple who were biologists and with whom I had shared the flat for one week, had the wonderful idea of placing a fragrant bunch of wild flowers in a vase with water. Such an anonymous and aseptic house was suddenly transformed into a pleasant, cosy and welcoming abode. All I have to do is think of the flowers on my way home after a day out wandering around the city.

The Botanical Garden is in Campo Alegre street. It surrounds one of the manor houses built in the area. This was the home of the poet Sophia de Mello Breyner Andresen. Now, like some of the other mansion houses, it is used by the university. The neighbourhood is reminiscent of a typical, upper bourgeoisie “garden city”, although the garden can only be found behind private walls that have little to do with the old socialist ideas of Ebenezer Howard. More discretely, between that street and the river, are two magnificent buildings: the Campo Alegre Theatre and the Faculty of Architecture building.

I’ve started going to theatre every week like a regressing pilgrim because this is almost the only place in the city where you can see non-commercial films in their original languages. Of course, the desire to see non-dubbed films was just a poetic whim if you consider the last film I went to see, “The world”, a Chinese film about the desires and fates of workers at a theme park in Beijing. The two films I saw before that were Lisboetas (Sérgio Tréfaut, 2004), a sober but lucid documentary portraying lives, anecdotes and distinctive aspects of new immigrants in Lisbon, and another equally moving documentary entitled El cielo gira (Mercedes Álvarez, 2005), about the slow decline of a town in the province of Burgos that starts by showing a series of dinosaur prints and ends with the installation of turbines and the refurbishment of a small palace converted into a rural tourism lodge. The screen is small, with seats for no more than fifty people, although every time I went there were never more than twenty. The seats are distributed almost obscenely because there are no aisles, the seats are very close together and normally half-way through each film the lights come on and there is a brief interval, surprising even the most unsophisticated spectators, immersed in the film, their eyes red. Thank God that so far the films haven’t been every erotic!

The Faculty of Architecture is a white building, with straight lines and no signs of superfluous decoration, with playful combinations of levels and planes, unworldly staircases and smooth ramps. Of course, it’s just another building by the ubiquitous Siza Vieira. The peace inside the building also strikes a chord. I suppose that some of his colleagues will criticize him no end: the degradation of materials by the sun and humidity, water filtering through the joints, no benches to sit down on, the library’s monastic appearance and its obscure position… But one can clearly sense the reverence for this myth and a certain fusion between his professional cradle of birth and his legacy of rationalist modernity, imbued with abundant light and simple, concatenated forms.

This week a poster announced a student visit to the “myth’s” professional studio, as well as a teachers’ demonstration and meeting in Lisbon to coincide with voting in the Assembly of the Republic on a motion to establish that only architects can sign construction projects,
something which other professionals such as engineers are currently authorized to do. A few
days ago I also discovered that Siza had been a member of the Communist Party for many
years, just like many teachers at that Faculty. I asked myself whether that was compatible
with being the owner of design companies employing dozens of workers, whether the
working conditions were satisfactory and whether the affiliations of the architects-stars would
somehow determine the selection of contracts they receive and accept. Since my research was
not geared to answering these questions, I continued to keep them to myself for a better
occasion.

Siza’s shadow also pursued me elsewhere and, just like the influence of 25 April, I let this
shadow caress me. Slightly intuitively, I used them as reference points to penetrate the city’s
permanent elements. Since they have a type of international “brand” status, I was also wary of
their attraction and prepared myself to deconstruct them at any moment.

Yesterday, I had a long and drawn-out conversation with an old member of the Bouça
Residents’ Association and Housing Cooperative they had created, Águas Férreas. It was the
second part of a chat we had started one week before because my interviewee, Carlos
Carvalho, has the gift of the gab and talks for hours on the widest variety of subjects, mainly
politics. I could adopt a sarcastic approach and lament my lack of sociological
professionalism by not changing the subject or interrupting him and drastically cutting down
his speech and abundant *excursus*. But that would be unfair because I actually enjoyed
listening to him and feeling so close to a long experience of civil action that was also
connected to some of my “intuitive routes”.

In fact, the houses officially unveiled on 25 April 2006 were - what a surprise – designed by
Siza Vieira. The architect completed the project in 1973 and the association immediately
promoted it shortly after the revolution. To do so, first they had to get hold of the land. They
quickly decided to occupy some buildings abandoned by the Ministry of Justice and use them
as barter to demand the construction of a building almost next to the block. As occurred with
so many other experiences during that period, the “Maoist” architects employed at the SAAL,
which was supervised by the FFH (*Fondo de Fomento da Habitação* – “Housing
Development Fund”), helped them to transfer and expropriate the land and authorized the
financing and construction of the new homes. This allowed them to house 56 families in 1979
before municipal authorities halted the project, which was not completed until this year.

The press reported this unusual event the same day I was wandering through *Parque da
Cidade* and along Avenida dos Aliados (which was also being restored under another
controversial yet praised project by Álvaro Siza), although I’d already become suspicious that
an architecture student had appeared in the news as one of the cooperative’s 72 tenants.
Carlos Carvalho told me that he was another one of the new residents, who included doctors,
a playwright, an Afrontamento technician and other middle-class professionals. How could so
many neighbourhood struggles end up this way?

This would take a long time to explain but I can offer a summarised explanation that the new
poor in the neighbourhood (in the *freguesia* (parish) of Cedofeita, part of the historical centre)
either could not, or did not want to, join the cooperative. As regards those who could not join
the cooperative, we visited some women who lived in those model sub-standard homes
known as “ilhas” which you can still find in Porto after more than one century of on-going
attempts by the municipal authorities to “have them demolished completely” (suspicious
redundancy). They paid between 100 and 200 euros to rent spaces little more than 20 metres
square, affected by damp, with no ventilation, and sometimes no bathrooms or ones self-built without any contribution from the owners. It is true that these residents were mainly elderly people, but I also saw some young people aged around thirty entering the quarter along the narrow paths where these “terraced shanty buildings” were grouped. Due to their age and incomes, they were unable to afford mortgages of 400 or 500 euros to buy the cooperatives’ homes, which cost between 80,000 and 100,000 euros (all around 90 m$^2$, true bargains!).

On the other hand, many young people who were descendants of the neighbourhood’s genuine population (genuina or genuine is a term often used here, like in many other cities, to refer to one or two generations) had already occupied other accommodation in the city, particularly in the suburbs of Valongo, Gondomar or Maia. There, property prices were much lower and, according to my informant, who gave away his despair at the weight of history, these young people are more attracted to the closed, individualist and reclusive designs of these flats, which they see as more “modern”. He told me that some of them still lived in the neighbourhood because they rejected the “popular”, simple and open housing with community spaces and low density populations that Siza and the neighbourhood activists had promoted with such enthusiasm in the centre of Porto.

As I wandered through the houses, I laconically greeted some of the oldest residents of the first phase of buildings. They had been selected from amongst the poorest residents in the district and had been given properties designed like temples – white and yellow at the bottom, bright red on top. But most of them distanced themselves from the association or did not want to have anything to do with it, and concentrated on surviving as conservatively as possible or immersed in their “culture of poverty” when they moved into those luxurious spaces. They even despised those central esplanades that invited festivity or community dinners.

Memory gradually blurred and faded away. Even the factory, which had also been occupied by the association near the “island” houses, resembled a ghostly premises that had slowly fallen into a coma. In the housing complex, an elderly lady danced fados with angry joy, a carpet had been hung out to air and clothes hung on the railings, and a group of young girls posed for me making seductive gestures before my clumsy attempts to take some photographs. A dark man with silver, white hair was reading a newspaper on another unworldly staircase. Different types of workers completed the final repairs to the new properties, which were still almost all empty.

People passed me on all sides, partly due to the location of the houses between Lapa metro station and calle Boavista. The hustle and bustle of life, however, was light and silent. Not even the surface metro did much to alter that sensation of an oasis so common to many historical centres. Despite Carlos’s optimism regarding the vitality and “cultural capital” that the future residents would bring, my feeling was that the inevitable social mix and artistic and commercial “bohemia” would be followed by a phase in which the most vulnerable groups would be expelled from that central niche. But I know that all social processes have unexpected consequences and that needs, or the threat of those needs, can once again mobilise people living on the edge of the unpredictable.

For some dark reason, I know that by digging into society’s most extreme experiences I can train my sensitivity to understand the events that take place in different social strata and contexts. It would be absurd to think that I am studying a research “object” isolated from other social groups (largely related and similar), from broader phenomena that rain on everyone, albeit with different intensity (we already know who pays for economic crises, who
provides the casualties in wars, who perishes in shipwrecks: just read the intriguing collection of poems by Enzensberger, *The sinking of the Titanic*), from greater or lesser established past experiences, from places visited and prohibited. For pragmatic purposes, let’s say that we can simply define and focus on some of these dimensions of reality. This is an appropriate illusion for good sellers, those who make customers believe they are buying the best and who want to buy freely and fervently. The so-called suspected theorists (Marx, Nietzsche and Freud), all Germans, already engaged in that sociological reflexivity, consisting in mistrusting illusions and arbitrariness to understand the world. Their erudition, atheism and shrewdness would make more than one of the lab scientists I’ve shared flat with in recent months (forensic doctors, molecular biologists, etc.) hair stand on end. But the “experts”, just like all Siza’s simple and contemplative works, also transmit a need to live problem-free, uncostly and uncomplicated existences (think about those compulsive consumers who buy pieces of junk in bazaars, perfect exponents to confirm the saying that “what’s cheap turns out to be expensive”), and concentrate on the essential. So what’s essential, then?

If I were to answer that question by saying that the “class struggle” is essential, for example, this would be a mistaken simplification far removed from my concerns about integrating the global understanding of things and concentrating on important social problems. An expression that has very little to do with the language of people living in extreme circumstances, and would require more effort to understand and translate, and time would be wasted. However, it is one of the “significant routes” that I like to test in every research process and in the rest of my life in general. Therefore, in this “experiment” you must always be willing to rub shoulders with the crudest and most harrowing reality. That’s what I have felt on some days recently for example.

The most dramatic event, which came on like a genuine left hook and knocked me for six, occurred at the headquarters of the Junta de Freguesia de Paranhos (Paranhos parish association). One day I went to the Caixa Geral de Depósitos bank to renew a cashpoint card. I was told that new rules required me to have a registered domicile in Portugal. I explained that I was only staying temporarily and they told me that the Juntas de Freguesia (parish associations) issue residence certificates without too many formalities. So, I went to the office closest to my apartment. On my first visit, the civil servant who attended me asked me for a rental receipt containing all the required information. I already knew that it could not be that easy, I whispered to myself. To avoid having to go to the head office of the Foundation that manages the apartment to ask for a form “with all the required information”, I changed the one I had to comply with the bureaucratic requirements and obtained my certificate on the second visit.

The civil servant joked with me about my “hidden” second name (Ángel), which she seemed to find very “engraçado” (funny), and some elderly people engaged in relaxed conversation on what was turning into a peaceful spring morning. After paying the fees and obtaining three or four receipts, which is the norm here, a woman burst into the vestibule shouting in anger. She started to throw chairs about over the desks, as if she were trying to hit the employees. She threw all the papers, folded leaflets, magazines and office material within reach to the floor. She brutally smashed one of those column-shaped mineral water dispensers. She hit and kicked the doors, making as much noise as possible. While she was doing all this, she continually shouted “call the police, call them, whores, thieves, you only know how to destroy people’s lives, whores, let the police come, yeah, let them come, I’m here …”. I and the dozen or so people who were in the office looked on in amazement and some of the female employees cringing at the back of their work cubicles sobbed sorrowfully. The woman was
small but strong. She wore modest clothes, suggesting that she just about had enough to live on. Within a matter of minutes she had unleashed a whirlwind of uncontained violence, and almost nobody knew how best to react.

My initial response was purely defensive because I tried to parry the chairs viciously raining down on me and on the elderly people around me. The woman’s rage grew and grew, but then she set her sights on another target to destroy, so we were spared a further onslaught of flying chairs. In that attack of rage and violence, the first thing that came to mind was the need to protect the physical integrity of those present. I immediately considered the hypothesis that the woman was desperate to protest against a social worker at the city council because she had taken her children away from her – as occurs in that devastating film by Ken Loach, *Lady Bird* - or that she had been refused council housing or the minimum wage. Her face remained impassive, rigid and threatening, fearless, as if she had nothing to lose. There was no point in asking her to calm down, but it was the only thing she could be asked to do in those circumstances. None of us there could resolve her problem because the problem already seemed unsolvable, and she must have been fully aware of that.

If that disruptive protest had been carried out by a group of people, the human resources managers may have sat down afterwards to negotiate and not everyone would have been punished. However, this incident was perpetrated by an individual. It was most likely that the woman could not just obtain anything more through institutional channels but the police who arrived shortly afterwards would probably accuse her and punish her more severely, adding to her misfortune. Perhaps she needed someone to give her a shoulder to cry on in her desperate situation, but, at the same time, it was difficult to deny her right to protest, to incisively break the routine of those of us who do have the privilege of complaining about the sluggishness of the bureaucratic formalities required to obtain a residence certificate or credit card.

In such situations, it’s easier to understand what it’s like to be a foreigner, someone who does not have a deep insight into people’s needs or people themselves. Worse still, it’s easier to understand what it means to be a victim rather than a criminal, regardless of appearances, to suffer social isolation, to feel extreme needs and to be an object of propagandistic social aid programmes. The programme currently implemented in Porto, under the PSD government (the conservative wing of post-1974 “socialism”), is called “Porto Feliz” (Happy Porto), announced everywhere with the following messages: “Por muito que lhe custe, não dê nada. Nós damos por si. Juntos, estamos a arrumar com a exclusão social”. In fact, in yesterday’s newspapers a member of the Bloco de Esquerdas (radical social group) criticised mayor Rui Rio for his programme which had only gotten the police to remove some “illegal car parking attendants” (“arrumadores”) from the urban landscape. As municipal advertising suggests, citizens are asked to “collaborate” in the task: don’t give handouts or charity to “illegal parking attendants”. What is unusual is that this issue of the municipal magazine (issue 10 of *Porto Sempre*) only says that “contacts have been made” with 1,700 of these “illegal parking attendants”, but nothing was mentioned about the support or options they have been offered, the ways in which they have been asked to abandon that activity and the new lives they will supposedly live.

One day I was walking with Helena Vilaça, an expert teacher in the sociology of religions, and we came across one of these “arrumadores”. Helena and the parking attendant started talking about their respective illnesses, about one of the beggar’s brothers and about her children. They didn’t talk about money at any moment in the conversation. With all her pragmatic ecumenism and self-assured expression, Helena immediately enlightened me: what
these want, first and foremost, is to be treated like people, for someone to worry about their problems, to chat, to listen to them and not to turn away in contempt. Charity is what matters least to them. “But you never gave him a penny?” I asked, faithful to my ingenious sociological materialism. Of course she did, but only when she wanted to; sometimes every month, on other occasions she immediately brushed away any suspicious gesture suggestive of wanting money that interrupted or blemished the “normal” mutual exchange of daily and personal information. This scene and her attitudes reminded me of a scene in another film by Ken Loach, *Bread and Roses*, in which Maya, the Mexican immigrant cleaning lady who worked in an office building, sensed from day one that she was invisible, just another piece of furniture, in the eyes of the executives she worked for. That indignation, coupled with the perception of other insults, encouraged her to incite her colleagues to rebel in an unprecedented strike by illegal immigrants in the very heart of Los Angeles’s business centre.

As is so often the case, when you’re not participating socially with other people in causes that are either just or, more modestly, worth the while, it’s not easy to avoid seeing yourself as a puppet, a useless being trapped in routines, ways of life and concerns, imprisoned in your professional ghetto and circle of acquaintances. That woman from Paranhos may live in the same block of council flats where I am lodging temporarily, just like the history teacher from La Bouça may live next to people surviving off nothing more than public subsidies, or we may still witness more interclass coexistence or mingling on beaches, sea fronts or public transport. The ruse consists in solely using the term “coexistence” to describe what should only be classified as “indifference”.

To avoid being taken over by indifference, I looked at an advert and was shocked at what I saw. The advert was about “a new concept of home” which appeared in the 8 May issue of *Público*, next to an article about 70 or more casualties in Iraq. The advert read as follows: “House, Smart and washed laundry. If you choose a Studio Residence it has everything you need. It has a T0 apartment [one room only] with fully-equipped kitchen, study, terrace and garage. Special offer of a Smart Fortwo Pure 50 c.v. for the first 20 buyers, ideal for those who want to live in the city centre and benefit from excellent access. You can also wash your laundry at the common laundrette, and there’s a 24-h security porter, meeting room and the comfort of living next to the Dolce Vita Shopping Centre.” In Japan, one Sunday newspaper reported that similar accommodation is sold or leased but without the terrace, kitchen and other bothersome spaces because the bedrooms are reduced to “capsule” beds. This undoubtedly reveals the great progress of humanity in its struggle to preserve city centre rights, “collective” living and the amount of “culture” that can be purchased by saving on built-up surface area.

26 May 2006

They say that only wise men learn from their mistakes. Although my first impressions about the official academic uniforms and exercises in social differentiation have not varied much, I must admit that on the night of the *Queima das Fitas*, I could not escape the fact that I was in the midst of a festive occasion, a type of carnival. The black costumes merged with coloured ribbons and students from every university faculty displayed their own coloured T-shirts and top hats. All this put the young people in festive mood to walk through the metro and streets. A night of madness beckoned. On successive days, I found more shops selling academic uniforms in calle Campo Alegre, next to the FLUP, and on Fernandes Tomás, a street perpendicular to Santa Caterina, in the very heart of Porto and the main shopping street in the
historical centre. So, I decided to accept this decorative university tradition. Once the euphoria had passed, however, all I could see was the odd individual showing off his black uniform and prolonging the hang-over of this rich and showy display.

I don’t have much time to conclude this stage of my field work in Porto. I will probably continue at some point in the future: Porto is close and a place where I am building friendships, despite my wolf-like hunger, which flourishes like a telluric eruption. I will leave the self-retrained and impersonal balance for academic texts. Here I am satisfied with the impressions I come across by chance, with covering the images and words I have gathered like an entomologist. In fact, many foreigners I have talked to say that Porto makes them feel out of time and excluded from the bewildering flows of people, information and things, all transformed into merchandise and money. I suspect that this is mainly due to the huge size of the historical centre and its Costumbrista, decadent and absorbing appearance. It is not by chance that UNESCO declared it a World Heritage site in 1996. It is nothing more than a central, esoteric almond in a set of industrially-reconverted municipalities, immersed in the construction of homes and shopping centres and all interconnected by the city’s new nervous system - the metro.

On 19 April, the new El Corte Inglés department store opened in neighbouring Vila Nova de Gaia, producing traffic jams along the whole internal ring road and on local access that had been specially repaired, exclusively, of course, to support the business of this emporium born under the protection of late Francoism in Madrid. Until recently, El Corte Inglés in Vigo was a place of pilgrimage for thousands of citizens from northern Portugal. This may have declined slightly with the opening of another store in Lisbon, but the one in Gaia will now attract obsessed consumers who love to see thousands of shelves overflowing with products and waste their time and lives on escalators. The new store continues to cause delirium because, unlike the gloomy buildings in most Spanish cities with virtually no windows or natural light, the first thing you notice about this one are the large, transparent vanes. I asked myself whether the company will apply the same “human resources” policy here in Portugal, characterized by strict control of personal intimacy and trade union disputes with workers. But little of this seems to matter to the municipal corporation that attracted the “investment”, initially envisaged for a site in the Boavista district of Porto, thanks to a scandalous reduction in official rates for building on the subsoil. All this was publicly criticized in the press at the time of the store’s pompous opening ceremony, but it is clear that the flood of consumers will ensure that this insolent embezzlement of public funds is quickly forgotten. That’s the price of progress and deindustrialisation.

A housekeeper called Arménia told me that she had worked for many years at a phosphorous factory near Lordelo. The factory moved to Spain and her employment opportunities were limited to housework because very few similar companies had stayed on in the area and most of the people were in the top age bracket, i.e. 40 or 45, making it particularly difficult for women or people without academic qualifications to find jobs or condemning them to perpetual unemployability. That’s why I get so annoyed when I hear people say things like “eu sou uma burra” and insist on using such abusive ceremonious treatment in Portugal: “senhor doutor” this, “senhor doutor” that (the term “doutor” is used to refer to everyone who likes as if they’re responsible for something, and that includes anyone from a porter to a minister!).

I know that a single logic cannot be established that a links between people who hire workers to perform house work and look after children those who pay the prices at El Corte Inglés or
spend half their lives in shopping malls, the restoration of city centres into places of public and private consumption, and the dearth of social policies and public subsidies that guarantee a worthy life for everyone. But I also know that it’s pointless trying to explain everything that happens to us by taking refuge in our individual defects or qualities. That’s why I have so much respect for people who make sure they do not cross the line between service to others and servility to superiors, almost always mixed with resignation before unsought circumstances that lead us to where we are. I was unable to react with humour but I didn’t let on to Arménia, unless she realised this from the perplexed expression on my face that is. Nor did I want to cast aside my sociological convictions just by speaking with her, because I don’t do this when I see so many desperate immigrants failing in their quests they arrive at this port of apparent luxuries and services within the reach of all dreams.

Although Porto is a phenomenal archipelago of neighbourhoods, the impermeability between different social classes comes to light. The middle and upper classes live mainly around Avenida Boavista and much of La Foz, in the western part of the city. If you follow the same thick line east, from Bonfim to Campanhã, you can find the poorest classes, shaken by all the upheavals caused by unsought circumstances in their lives. It is unusual to find someone who normally moves from one part of the city to the other, such extremes are not easy and commonplace, although there is always the hybrid, transitional core with its black holes and restored islets. Aware of these divisions, I set myself the task of digging deeper into the experiences of social organisation and development programmes promoted by the city council for almost one decade on the eastern limits of Porto.

One day, armed with some books and articles I had already read, I attended a meeting of around thirty experts involved in a new national action programme in “critical districts”. On this occasion, the selected district was Lagarteiro, in the freguesia (parish) of Campanhã. One of these eternal meetings, which lasted for several hours, was chaired by the geographer Teresa Sá. She ran the meeting firmly and resolutely, reviewing information, situations and work prospects, organizing speakers, keeping “order”, pulling all the strings that connected more than twenty people at the meeting and, of course, calling the next meeting. Hard work, open doors, and a very productive tension. At the meeting, I met a social worker from Campanhã, “o doutor Pinto”, who I visited a few days later at his Junta de Freguesia office and who I also saw at another meeting of activist female residents (and a couple of male residents too) at the primary school in the Lagarteiro district. In contrast to my experience when interviewing the municipal architect, for example, his story was brimming with emotion and militant devotion to the poor population he “administers”. Of course, this was perhaps influenced by the fact that he supported the governing party (PSD) whereas the municipal architect was a PCP supporter, or at least that’s what other colleagues have told me.

“Doutor” Pinto, who introduced himself to me as “Chalana”, started theorizing about why the poorest people did not participate in associations, demonstrations or public programmes. In my opinion, his analysis was not simplistic. Quite the opposite, it seemed well structured and justified. At his own choice, he had spent almost ten years working as an “agitator” in marginal neighbourhoods. He listed the following factors: a passive culture inherited from the long period of dictatorial control; a servile and conformist education deriving from a lack of school qualifications; the consideration that there are much more important problems (such as individual or family drug dependency, or prostitution, often inextricably linked to the former) than working in favour of collective causes, following bad experiences or non-existent results in previous project, the obstacles to participative processes placed by governing institutions and the imposition of criteria by experts working with the most needy populations.
We then reviewed most specific spaces and cases. I asked him about the Parque Oriental (East Park) which, according to the PDM (the General City Planning Plan) of the 1960s, should be the counterweight of the western Park, justifiably the only one baptized as the Parque da Cidade (City Park) As you can imagine, the eastern park has not opened yet because the plan has to move through different designs, departments, technical changes-of-opinion and debates among municipal councillors. Chalana even told me that most of the residents in Campanhã don’t give two hoots about the park and that’s if they have even the smallest piece of information about its possible development and preservation. So, the battle for that park remains the responsibility of ecological groups who cannot muster up any enthusiasm among people who have never even been to these peripheral parts of the city and private companies who simply crave after the land as a site for investing in “paid” leisure projects (horse rides, for example).

In a recent edition of the newspaper Diagonal (www.diagonalperiodico.net) to which I subscribe, perhaps the only one that makes me “enthusiastic” about social movements every fortnight, my attention was drawn to a story about social environmental project. The author, an expert, claimed that he had managed to involve people by creating three types of concatenated spaces: spaces for friendship (by strengthening individual interests and concerns); spaces for mutual cooperation in practical; and spaces for community work. My ideas in this regard have always prompted me to doubt experiences that do not develop from bottom upwards, from basic needs, experiences and objectives established independently by people who want to change their social environment. Of course, communities tend to be fragmented and often daily problems of survival take priority and make it impossible to organise meetings or mobilise residents.

In fact, Chalana explained to me that, a grosso modo, 30% of local residents, precisely those who had achieved greater job or academic stability, wanted to leave the neighbourhood, felt ashamed about living there and tried to develop their social lives outside it. They were aware of the stigma and they wanted to spare themselves from its secondary effects by the most direct route possible, by fleeing. At the same time, he told me that around 3,000 people from the parish continued to live in huts or “ilhas” or other types of accommodation that do not comply with minimum living conditions. The community is still torn by many other internal rifts and conflicts between old and new residents (imposed by the municipal authorities under rehousing programmes), different drug trafficking groups, or people who use and develop spaces according to different criteria (how and where to park cars, the theft of hanging clothes, rubbish, music, etc.). It was as if I was once again watching one of those “ghetto” films by Spike Lee or, more extreme, a Buñuel film, if it were not for the fact that I’ve already experienced similar situations in the historical centre of Vigo or, many years earlier, in the districts of Canillejas and Lavapiés in Madrid, and because sociological literature has also described many such stories. While I listened to him, I kept asking myself the following question: where are the solutions?

It would be very naïve and arrogant of me to go there to sell them their own 30-year-old recipes. Chalana’s “customers” prefer to walk to the shopping centre or watch a football match at the Estádio do Dragão, than protest about the lack of doctors. The latest “motorway”, which has fenced in the neighbourhood even more, was wonderfully received by drivers who use their sports cars to escape from the police on raids. One of the local cultural associations was eventually transformed into the bar where most drugs were trafficked. Last week, audiovisual equipment was stolen from the “ATL” (leisure workshop for
extracurricular activities), so the meeting at the school had to be held in a locked room, while some scoundrels watched us through the patio grilles like strange insects. At that meeting, stickers were also exchanged about the growing number of situations that were creating stigmas: the taxi drivers charge more because the neighbourhood does not appear on their maps; young people only put the name of the street on their CVs when looking for jobs but don’t mention the name of the district; doctors refuses to go on visits unless they are accompanied by police officers...

I asked myself how far we were from experiencing events like the ones experienced in the French “banlieues” last autumn, when immigrants set about burning cars in the streets of France’s cities. Curiously, most people called to that meeting had been summoned personally by Chalana and expressed most pride at living in the neighbourhood. Their friends and families lived there, so travelling was always an issue for the least well-off. Some people simply attended because that way the social worker would give them something in exchange, like a bus pass or a new pair of glasses. However, it was clear that this select group only represented part of the population, and it would be hard to get them more involved in upcoming programmes to demonstrate that their involvement was “participative”, as required by European directives governing urban and social initiatives.

On none of my visits to Campanhã did I sense any hostility or violence in the streets. The only exceptions, as tends to be the case, were when I tried taking photographs of houses and a person appeared, cursing me and asking for explanations. I found solace in the slightly wild and abandoned simplicity of the garden in Praça da Corujeira, where the head office of the Junta de Freguesia is located, largely void of any artificial additions. A notice board in the association’s building combined invitations to professional training courses with two striking, colourful posters encouraging people to enlist in the army: “Voluntario para o Exército em régime de contrato. Mais do que uma opção, uma decisão.” I found it harder to get to the district of Lagarteiro, hidden at all times of day in a maze of old streets reminiscent of an old country village and fast roads, without any directions as was to be expected. Only the directions from local residents sitting on street corners or bar doorsteps, or graffiti (“Family Gang”, “Lagarteiro gang”, “Vida de rua”) tell you that you are about to enter Comanche territory.

An interesting story was published in the newspapers a few days ago: a road currently under construction was diverted four kilometres to protect a small pack of wolves, at an additional cost of 100,000 to the initial budget. At the school meeting, however, they insisted that money would not resolve the neighbourhood’s miseries: the problem was not the houses but the people. And, might I add, the things and houses people make.

31 May 2006

In Porto, tourists can get drunk simply by enjoying monuments, beautiful buildings, squares, churches and ruins, but those who prefer the other option can of course also get drunk between meals on the famous “vinhos do Porto”. Equally symptomatic is the theatre offer, with advertising posters covering walls every week of the year. Museums, galleries and various foundations are also continually organizing exhibitions in an attempt to prise people away from their computer screens or capture people from music concerts. Apart from the huge numbers of people who pursue these activities, it is in this area (and in the traffic jams at rush hour!) that you can see Porto’s true symbolic core, despite its apparent architectonic
decadence and its relative demographic decline: between 1960 and 2000 the city lost more than 40,000 registered inhabitants (they always leave out the non-registered residents and visitors!), falling from 303,000 to 263,000. We should also remember that Porto’s metropolitan area, known as Grande Porto, has not stopped growing, from approximately 420,000 inhabitants in 1960 to more than 825,000 in 2000.

Some new buildings, such as the Casa da Música, are inexcusable achievements shrouded in controversy about how to fill them with content and get people to go to their shows. On other occasions, they are places brimming with history, like the space between Praça de Carlos Alberto and Campo de Mártires da Pátria, formed by large granite sea for pedestrians to walk over, noble university buildings, traditional cafeterias and modest or ghostly houses. The guides will confuse you by taking you to the Palacio de Cristal (judging from the photographs, the real palace, elegantly filled with ornaments, was replaced during the dictatorship by the current building, which is much less pure, with a type of dome for sporting events, although this week it was used to host a book fair), the Palácio da Bolsa, the Transport Museum in the Alfândega Nova building (a costly reform financed with aid from the European Union), or the incombustible Mercado do Bolhão, which is very handy for all visitors leaving the cathedral-like railway station of São Bento (a citadel almost on the way which remained boxed in the city centre due to the greater “functionality” of the Campanhã station) and who let themselves be dragged along by shopping inertia to Santa Caterina street.

If you are overcome by curiosity on one of your visits, you might discover that opposite one of the city’s cultural vanguard jaunts (Maus Hábitos, in Passos Manuel street) stands a symbol of rationalist architecture, with marked lines and in a pastel colour, characteristic of a large number of buildings distributed around the city: this is the Coliseu, a true localist symbol that was famously and actively defended (promoted by the mayor’s office) when the IURD (Igreja Unida do Reino de Deus) expressed an interest in acquiring it a few years back for its congregations. I visited the Coliseu a few years ago to see Maria João accompany Joe Zawinul. She gave a beautiful, warm and rhythmic performance. However, the inside of the building seemed cold and lifeless. Tom Wolfe would have been shocked and would have enjoyed himself! The dandy novelist wrote a vehement critique of rationalist architecture, entitled “From Bauhaus to Our House?”, which I always recommend to my architecture students (to be honest, more for its rejection of professional sectarianism than for its aesthetic controversy).

Just as books, residents who covet their memories or your own experiences have gradually prompted you to associate stories with each place you have visited, it seems that nostalgia grows when the time comes to emigrate again. It is as if we are also bidding farewell to knowledge that we used to guide ourselves, to recognise others and to perceive the logic of more general connections between all the fragments. This is the when you ask yourself again: what have I come here to do?

Without being able to stop a custom I started as soon as I began studying at university, every time I go to a city I first look for and sniff out all the “old” bookshops, those museums of used books that have passed through different hands. I started doing this as a way of spending less money and finding interesting rarities with intellectual value, untainted by ephemeral commercial fashions and snobbish intellectuals. It has now become a way of “testing” the supposed value city residents attribute to written knowledge. This may be perceived as anachronic today, when Google seeks to provide Internet users (censorship in China permitting, of course) with free access to millions of books, or when we spend hours on end
plugged into the Internet reading and writing at the same time. However, I believe that the texts published in traditional format in book form still have worthy artistic values (in terms of the design, layout, printing and binding techniques) and functional values (easy to consult on shelves, carry without pages being mixed up or lost and read with low energy consumption).

Of course, anything that costs as little as possible is welcome (in short, copyleft). The simple effort of understanding, reflecting on and consciously using knowledge entails personal costs that it would be almost ridiculous to put a price on. For that reason, only two suppositions are valid in second-hand bookshops: you would have to talk to the bookstore owners to determine whether the stores are frequented more by collectors and investors, people who only buy comics, novels or cooking books, people who buy books to match their living room furniture, or a wide variety of inquisitive people prowling around their bookshelves; and you would also have to take into account the time they dedicate in their lives to reading, thinking, discussing and disseminating their thoughts about what they have read. What a Herculean task!

Since tourists visiting Porto are unlikely to find it easy to locate these types of bookshops (“alfarrabistas”), I will now provide details of the locations of the ones I have discovered: the Utopia bookshop I’ve already mentioned is in Praça da República; nearby is another bookstore called “Varadero”, in Travesia de Figueiróã (a continuation, to the north, of Cedofeita street); there are other stores in Boavista street, Travesia de Cedofeita and “Académica” in Mártires da Liberdade street; near La Torre dos Clérigos you can find the Lello bookshop, perhaps the only one advertised in tourist guides because it’s one of the oldest in the city and was recently restored to all its past glory; opposite the clergy building, after crossing Rodrigues Sampaio street where prostitutes ply their trade and where there is a restaurant called “Vigo no Porto”, you can reach Bonjardim street where you’ll find a narrow bookstore selling many printed copies, the shop window is full of references to 25 April, which is when I visited the area; nearby, in 31 de Janeiro street, near Avenida de los Aliados, is one of the “Bertrand” bookshops; lastly, there is another such store if you walk down Calle de las Flores, in the heart of the Baixa district. Apart from the usual spiritual peace in these shops, I was surprised that two of them – the ones in Varadero and Bonjardim – were run by father and daughter. The Bonjardin bookshop also had a warm, local atmosphere create by the continual greetings and visits of locals, who spent many hours there having a coffee and engaging in heated debates about any topic.

The parks and gardens (about which I found a simple book by Jacinto Rodrigues, who years before had written passionately about revolutionary urban development and planning), the vegetarian restaurants (I would particularly recommend El Suribachi in Calle de Bonfim, and El Karité in Calle de Breyner), the flea markets, or the avenues along which you can stroll and run for more than half an hour, are some other targets (and “tests”) I set myself to help me understand the city better. These arbitrary choices consequently forced me to consider its limits and unique qualities. They’re arbitrary! (“What a science sociology is!” laymen will say mockingly). Overall, however, they provide a dense mesh of references mixed with things you read, hear and experience. Books are only dead knowledge.

Cities are formed by sets of routes, and sometimes swirling experiences and hieroglyphic symbols waiting to be unravelled. So, most people don’t need books to chart their own maps. But, is it just a question of taking excursions around the city? In the film “Lisboetas”, a large Russian lady appears on a beach, her body wobbling around in her bathing costume, talking on her cell phone to her relatives. During the conversation, she talks about how good life is in Portugal, the good job prospects, the food and sun, but she says that the only thing that’s a
disaster is the education. Today, the newspaper reports new grievances of misunderstood and beleaguered teachers suffering in their difficult daily routines, as well new plans by the Portuguese government to reform aspects of the educational system. One of the most controversial proposals is the evaluation of staff by students’ parents. It is the subject of heated debate and the chief editor of the daily newspaper Público (and, by extension, the Minister) is bombarded with criticism everyday. In one article that appears in Revista Crítica de Ciências Sociais (RCCS), published by the University of Coimbra, I also read about a study which had reported that among social movements in the last decade in Portugal, education-related protests have acquired so much prominence that they now out-numbered all other causes of discontent.

It is impossible not to relate these broader phenomena with every school you see or with the people you talk to in demonstrations. Access to the city, to local life, is just one way of approaching more global phenomena. Conversely, knowledge of these phenomena seems to require physical and personal experience close to its more specific materiality. In fact, I am normally averse to basing my studies exclusively on cold statistics prepared by third parties or to entrusting all interviews or observations to “bursary students” or eventual collaborators. These are the extremes of the “industrialization” of sociological research that I object to most strongly. However, it seems that the awareness of preconceived opinions can only really be achieved by immersing yourself fully in field work and threading together the tapestry of situations, people, information and strategies. What is global is, in fact, social. I would not like to worsen the confusion of people who are suspicious of sociology, but suffice it to say that, to my understanding, sociological expertise consists in knowing how to select global phenomena that have a more direct impact in each situation, population, problem, locality or city studied. And this leads us onto epistemological questions that are beyond the scope of my more modest impressionist intentions.

What I do have clear is that I’ve come here to perform sociology. To some extent, I’ve come to Porto to experience total sociology, integrated in my way of living and discovering the world, provided, of course, that domestic obligations and economic survival are not an obstacle. On Monday, José Madureira Pinto gave a conference entitled “As relações sociais de observação”. He is one of the oldest and most revered sociologists in Porto. He was advisor on education to President Jorge Sampaio and supervised Virgilio Borges Ferreira’s thesis on urban sociology. However, his conference and his works that I had read addressed methodological issues on how to perform sociology. I obviously listened to him with great interest. It was pleasing to hear his calm tone and the clarity of the few ideas he presented without the help of any notes or slides. He didn’t use pompous expressions or quotes or any rhetorical aids that might have undermined the intelligibility of his message. Those charismatic ingredients naturally captured the unconditional attention of the thirty or so participants who were before him.

Just like Michael Burawoy a few weeks earlier, José Madureira Pinto referred to an “old” but essential book by William Foot Whyte: Learning from the Field. “Everything was there”, he suggested, everything that normally does not appear in books describing social research techniques and methods: how to enter a place you know almost nothing about; how to relate to natives who see you as a stranger; how to be critical about your own personal experiences; or how to know what lies behind every interaction and interview. I was comforted by the thought that I had read that book when I was only 20. To a certain extent, the field diaries of many anthropologists have been better exercises in the “sociology of sociology” than rudimentary, methodological manuals written by sociologists or their own “objectivist”
reports without a trace of the researcher’s presence. Was he really there? Did he know what he was talking about or did he outsource so much routine research that in the end he had to put together an exotic “puzzle” to the satisfy his customers?

Madureira Pinto has clearly been influenced by the work of Pierre Bourdieu but he unashamedly addressed the issues of self-reflexivity without beating around the bush or unnecessary technicalities. At the end of the conference, the Department offered some sweet and salted brochettes at the staff bar. This gave teachers and students the chance to mingle, suss each other out, get involved in future projects and talk about anything censored in established circles. In other words, it was an opportunity to invest in “social capital”. Personally, during this break it pleased me to learn that our speaker had used part of my article on “sociologies of space”, which I had given him during the season of documentaries, in his classes at the Faculty of Economics.

On Saturday, the Department of Sociology had also organised a leisure get-together (plus “treasure hunt”) at Parque da Cidade and, one week earlier, a series of debate conferences (at FNAC in the El Norte Shopping mall!) on utopias. So, within a few months my resident faculty had given me many opportunities to speak with other sociologists and I came to the conclusion then that we also engage in sociology that way. Along the same lines, my last interview to compare information about public initiatives in Campanhã, was also with a sociologist (and social worker), as if by chance a circle had closed from which you cannot, and do not want to, escape.

On the eve of the Soccer World Cup in Germany, not only have the means of mass indoctrination increased the time devoted to sports commentary even more abusively, but national flags have been unfurled on many windows, balconies and car windows. The SRU (Sociedade de Reabilitação Urbana), responsible for halting the dramatic social exodus from the Baixa district, is on the verge of financial bankruptcy. On Saturday, the metro line reached Francisco Sá Carneiro airport and Rui Rio, President of the Câmara do Porto (Municipal Chamber of Porto) and Junta Metropolitana (executive organ formed by the 18 presidents of the city halls in the metropolitan area of Porto), at the same time avoided commenting on the future of the metro lines pending construction. A contingent of the GNR (Guarda Nacional Republicana – Republican National Guard) has left for East Timor to try to appease the sides in the armed conflict that has dragged the former Portuguese colony (later occupied by Indonesia) into its most serious crisis in recent history, prompting its classification as a “failed State”.

Back at Afrontamento, and thanks to Paula’s mediation, I was sold some books at a 40% discount. I was even given an illustrated chronology of the revolutionary period. I gave a number of books to participants at my conference on the squatter movement. So, everything goes in circles and we never know the consequences that our present actions may have. In another RCCS article, Dick Flacks complained about the irrelevance of sociological studies for social movements because we do not empower activists with sufficiently useful and comprehensible intellectual resources and strategic information. Flack quotes another classic sociologist, Wright Mills, and these words make my urban jaunts even more cheerful and help me retract my map and rejoice in the virtues of a life without ties and complacency: “Under what conditions do men come to want to be free and capable of acting freely?” A somewhat pompous question perhaps, and one that I am not sure will convince people who view my profession with scepticism and disbelief. I hope to find more answers at the next station.