

Arrábida revisited

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In 1993, I was a young undergraduate student trying to get my degree in Law. It was not an easy task for me, I must confess. Looking back to that period I am proud of myself in the sense that I managed to survive through those five painful years and eventually got my degree in Law. But I never really felt at home. What I wanted was to understand what the Rule of Law meant, and all I got was to study laws and rules. What really interested me were questions about legitimacy, but I only got answers on the grounds of legality.

As I later on found out, Isaiah Berlin, commenting on his own doubts on which path to pursue in his studies, once observed that “Law was too dull for words”. As in many other instances, he was right. But at that time, in Portugal, the schools of Law were the closest thing to what I really wanted, and that was, obviously, Political Theory. So, it happened by chance that, when I was reading the daily newspaper, I found an advertisement of an intensive seminar on Political Theory. Of course, I didn’t think twice and applied immediately. And that moment was for me a life changing event.

I still remember how eager I was to take part in that course. I spent the two months before the seminar reading through the bibliography, trying to learn as much as I could and imagining what it would be like. Actually, it surpassed my very best expectations. It took place in one of Portugal’s most beautiful places: the Convent of Arrábida. Overlooking the Atlantic, the general ambiance was quiet, secluded and monastical. Almost intimidating for a student in his early twenties. But as soon as the speakers started presenting their papers, the conference room felt as if it had been ignited. Each paper was followed by multiple discussions that went on through the coffee-breaks, and then on through lunch and dinner, only to be resumed the next morning on an even more intensive pace.

What a privilege it was for this Portuguese undergraduate Law student to be there, witnessing all this, in the midst of great academics like Steven Lukes, John Gray, David Miller, John Kekes, Clifford Orwin, Raymond Plant or Chandran Kukathas, to name but a few. Names only known to me from books – unfortunately most of them not even available in Portuguese libraries at the time. And how incredible it was for us to be encouraged by them to discuss and elaborate on our naïve questions. “Yes, go on...” (I can still hear Professor Steven Lukes saying this, laying back on his chair with his eyes shut.)

Fortunately, this seminar went on a regular annual edition and it actually became the embryo for the M.A. programme that Professor João Carlos Espada started in 1996, at the Portuguese Catholic University, soon followed by the founding of the Institute for Political Studies – which would become my home, ever since, and where I pursued both my M.A. and Ph.D degrees.

From the small Convent of Arrábida and a group of 30 to 40 professors and students, the seminar has grown extraordinarily and moved elsewhere. First to Sintra, and then

to Cascais, finally finding its home in the Hotel Palácio, in Estoril, welcoming more than 400 participants every year from all corners of what we still like to call the “free world”. Since it settled in Estoril, the event adopted the name of Estoril Political Forum. It has grown much bigger but it still keeps the spark of its first editions, in the sense that it is much more than a forum where great political minds meet: it is a place where bright young students have the opportunity to step up from their daily academic routines and engage on that permanent and unending quest about the fundamental questions of our political existence.

*JTCB
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