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For Tita. With Love.

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May, Mills and Me

Ritual plays an important role in higher education and in the university collective life. On every campus, events are organized to welcome new students, and years later send them forth as graduates and *alumni*. Being a sociologist, for long interested in rituals and, at the same time, the proud aunt of a senior student just finishing her university studies, I did not indifferently experience the postponement of 2020 graduation ceremonies because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

In May, while experiencing the (slow) deconfinement from the lockdown in Portugal, I often remembered the words of C. Wright Mills (1959) in *The Sociological Imagination*, when addressing the beginning student remembers that “the most admirable thinkers within the scholarly community you have chosen to join do not split their work from their lives. They seem to take both too seriously

to allow such dissociation, and they want to use each for the enrichment of the other” (Mills, 1959: 195). Without claiming to belong to those “admirable thinkers”, decisions to cancel or to postpone in-person graduation ceremonies was just one of the multiple events that during this period led me to think about the power of sociological imagination to understand how global pandemic impacts and connects my life and the lives of those closest to me.

Just as probably many sociologists around the world, I remember exactly the context in which I was introduced to C. Wright Mills’s *The Sociological Imagination* (Mills, 1959). By that time, I was a sociology freshman, who had just started university. Professor Augusto da Silva (1929-2014), a Jesuit priest, kept quoting by heart many sociologists in his lectures. Among them was C. Wright Mills (1916-1962), and often a free adaptation

of this quote was repeated: “the sociological imagination enables us to grasp history and biography and the relations between the two within society. That is its task and its promise.” (Mills, 1959: 6). Moved by curiosity, as soon as I could after my first sociology classes, I went to the university library. In the “sociology corridor”, it was not difficult to find the book, with several copies lining up on the shelf. The Brazilian Zahar Editores edition I consulted at the time had a red cover, and when I first touched it, I had the feeling that many hands before mine had already leafed through it, and many had read it. I must admit that, by then, my exposure to the book was limited, as I read just some parts, namely “The Promise” and the appendix “On Intellectual Craftsmanship”. Only later, I realised the real importance and long-standing influence of C. Wright Mills’s *The Sociological Imagination*, and that what I thought was an individual fascination and enthusiasm, had happened probably in the same engaging way with many students and researchers all over the world (ISA, 1998; Scanlan & Grauerholz, 2009).

Diving again into the pages of *The Sociological Imagination* in May 2020, not as a first-year student anymore, but as a PhD researcher interested in family rituals, constituted a new and stimulating opportunity to think about my own academic biography and to spotlight the multiple relations between the pace of everyday life and celebrations, rituals and time in university. Just as it travels from China’s Hubei Province to Évora, Portugal; from the cloister of the University into the bedroom of my niece; and from the past into the future, this text ends-up interrogating the apparently irrelevant familiar through the never-blurred lens of the sociological imagination.

Squares, Stadiums and the many Arenas of Personal Life

The general lockdown caused by COVID-19 came to give visibility to the often-neglected presence – and importance – of family rituals. Despite differences between states and territories regarding orientations towards public spaces such as streets, religious worship spaces, monuments, museums, workspaces, schools and universities, rules on public and private physical gatherings were imposed and observed, as collective social occasions significantly increase the risk of coronavirus spreading. Whether these rules applied to large-scale spaces, such as squares, stadiums and theatres, they had a twofold important impact on family relations as specific arenas of personal life.

The World Health Organization’s recommendations on public health measures and surveillance for novel coronavirus strongly limited the intra and intergenerational relations outside the house, which impacted the extended, yet variable family network composed by uncles and aunts, cousins and grandparents. Because the elderly was considered a priority risk group, strict guidelines issued by WHO aimed its protection, which meant keeping physical distancing with the close social network, including relatives. Specifically, wherein grandparents play an important role in the daily life of their non-cohabiting children and grandchildren, namely when assuring routine care needs, impacts were more visible.

Additionally, limiting the possibility of gathering had instant consequences in the cancellation or postponement of many family occasions and events, both “small and big days” (Costa, 2011). Of these, probably the most visible impact was on life-cycle rituals. Because marriage, birth and death are rendered cultural events of great significance, countless related news appeared in

the media: weddings were postponed, and contacts were limited to greet new-borns in the hospital and bid farewell to the dead in funeral services. Beyond the many “*Ring by Spring*” postponements, in a more invisible domain, not so much of life-cycle rituals but family traditions, restrictions strongly impacted family visits and reunions, birthdays, anniversaries, and many holidays and other seasonal or festive celebrations taking place both inside and outside the home. Graduation ceremonies, insofar as they call for different dimensions of individuals’ personal lives, were no exception.

Family rituals constitute prescribed practices (Morgan, 1996; 2011) arising from family interaction, holding a symbolic or “special meaning” (Bossard & Boll, 1950; Wolin & Bennett, 1984; Imber-Black & Roberts, 1993; Fiese, 2006). They comprise days or occasions during the year or the life of the individuals, as well as moments in the daily routine, covering activities from the most organized and rare occasions to the most spontaneous and frequent (Wolin & Bennett, 1984) or as Imber-Black and Roberts (1993) put it, from “the outside” to the “inside calendar” of the families. Rituals offer a “protected time and space” (Imber-Black & Roberts, 1993), considered as “different” from the everyday life, which can be anticipated and remembered for years to come (Etzioni & Bloom, 2004). Rituals are communal, strongly emotionally invested experiences, and socially impose to individuals through tradition and social pressure, thus allowing for a distinct perception on time. Whether a wedding can be cancelled and postponed, a funeral can’t. Similarly, if a graduation celebration can be rescheduled, the expected day for it to happen, itself, cannot, and students end up completing their courses as they pass final exams. As *chronos*, time continues to count even if socially it can be sometimes suspended. In fact, it is but *kairós*

– the socially differentiated appropriation of time, that allows one to speak in “suspended time” (Bell, 1997).

Graduation as a Rite of (Blurred) Passages

French anthropologist Arnold van Gennep founded his analysis on rituals on the idea of “passage”. In *Rites of Passage*, van Gennep (1909) distinguished three successive but separate stages in the analysis of the individuals’ life-cycle key moments (birth, coming-of-age for boys and girls, marriage and death): separation, margin, and aggregation. According to this author, societies are characterized by discontinuity, and the rite of passage seeks to remake the social order questioned in each new stage of the human life cycle. In so doing, it guides the individual behaviour from one stage into the other, diminishing fear and anxiety in face of the unknown while controlling expected and “normal” behaviour in society.

Differently from “primitive” societies, highly industrialized and secular cultures in postmodernity lack clear life-passage rituals (Bell, 1997). Major events as birth, coming-of-age, marriage and death tend to be less determined by others or tradition, more personalized, and more informal, less communal and more private. Specifically, regarding the entry into adulthood, one can speak more about transitions into adulthood, not necessarily linear or predictable, rather than a clear-cut passage in time (Galland, 1985; Guerreiro, and others, 2007). Far from strict separation and initiatory practices, contemporary coming-of-age rites are more subtle, variable and dependent on the meaning each one recognizes them. To illustrate, a formal debutant ball or simply celebrating one’s eighteen birthday going out with friends, a high school graduation party or a senior trip, getting the driving license or owning a

car, leaving the parents' home, going for an interrail experience, living with a partner, marrying or having children.

Van Gennep's early work on rites of passage is landmark in influencing many studies on rituals and symbolism attending events, such as graduation ceremonies (Gusfield & Michalowicz, 1984; Manning, 2000). While graduation sometimes implies changes from places of residence and affective places of belonging, symbolically marks a person's transition from a stage of learning and dependence (from the family of origin) to a stage of independence and self-sufficiency. Even though nowadays society is less linear than in the past, with graduation meaning not necessarily the entry in the labour market, this moment keeps a "special" yet variable importance across countries, social contexts and families (Manning, 2000).

Having participated in several graduation ceremonies, either as a student, more recently, as a member of the university's rector team of the university where I teach, made me strength the belief of its multiple, sometime hidden, meanings. Among peers, this is mainly a time of celebration, farewell and commencement, allowing for some degree of excess and socially accepted licence. If taken from a family point of view, graduation ceremonies can be envisaged as extremely significant shared family rituals affirming for success and accomplishment among amid adversities. Especially for first-generation graduates, low-income backgrounds, migrant contexts or when studying in higher education was accompanied by personal, family, financial or health problems, to participate in a graduation ceremony can be a tangible way of showing the student and its family resilience and sacrifice, and to give rise to hopes and dreams of future reward through educational and generational mobility (Manning, 2000).

Envisaged as family rituals, graduation celebrations involve both host and guests. Graduates gather with their parents, partners and other relatives and friends, who usually join bringing meanings, obligations and expectations in the form of interactive and significant processes that unfold in family and culturally specific contexts. Activities may include joining in specific places, such as the university facilities, the house of the student or the family's home; enrolling in some kind of ceremonial, either an academic tribute, sometimes including a religious service; exchanging gifts towards the ceremony preparation, such as specific clothes or artifacts, aimed at the future professional life, namely a personalized pen, an instrument or a religious or secular amulet, or simply to mark the moment itself as a "memorable" and "happy" occasion, as when congratulating the honoree with money, flowers, jewelry or candies; finally, participating in a communal feast, often including abundant food and drink, music, eventually dancing. Moreover, these are expectedly moments of shared enthusiasm, to be lived positively, with happy feelings and wishes of luck, health and a prosperous future. As Bossard and Boll point out, family rituals are social in nature while having "an emotional colouring" (Bossard & Boll, 1950: 186), incorporating into itself "the sound, sights, temperatures, touch sensations, and human relationships" (Bossard & Boll, 1950: 37). Time, space and emotion, this is the heuristic triangle on which lies the understanding of what is a family ritual.

Pandemic Outbreak and Graduating Indoors

WHO declared the outbreak of a Public Health Emergency of International Concern on the 30th of January 2020 and a pandemic on 11th March (WHO, 2020). The day before, on March 10th, Lawrence S. Bacow,

President of Harvard University addressed the Harvard community to update on major near-term changes that would limit exposure to the disease. The first of such update was the announcement that Harvard would begin transitioning to virtual instruction for graduate and undergraduate classes, aiming to have such a transition complete by Monday, March 23th, the first day of scheduled classes following Spring Recess. Students were asked not to return to campus and to meet academic requirements remotely until further notice (Bacow, 2020). Following, many universities around the world suspended physical campus activities, went virtual and wrapped-up digitally the spring semester.

As the pandemic spread around the world, teachers and students engaged in new forms of keeping the possible normality. Classes went online and final evaluations were made, with an effort to keep the smallest number of students behind. While for many, this was seemingly a brief interruption in their academic pathway, for others it abruptly marked the completion of university studies. Students went home; friends got physically apart, and many academic plans were wiped from the calendar. Against all odds and investments, the Class of 2020 was deprived of the usual in-person graduation celebrations annually scheduled for May.

Notwithstanding, *Time* magazine's cover gave visibility to "Generation Pandemic" (Image 1). The image contrasts quite impressionistically in the same plane the festive atmosphere to which alludes the golden balloons and the purple party lights on the wall at the back of the room with the stateness of two young people sitting on the couch. The boy, on the left, looks intently at the screen of the laptop while typing on the keyboard; on the right, a girl looks boredly straight ahead, hand under her face.

Early in the spring semester, many universities outright began to cancel graduation's ceremonies and rituals and rethink ways of acknowledging student's work and success while still maintaining social distance amid the coronavirus outbreak. Some have engendered virtual ceremonies, honoring students online, and others planned in-person graduations, meant to take place in late 2020 or sometime in 2021 (Nadworny, 2020). Graduates also passed the moment in many ways. While some experienced loneliness and boredom, other have taken things into their own hands, finding new ways to celebrate. Mary Retta, a 2020 graduate of Vassar College (NYC), signed an opinion article in *The New York Times* titled "I graduated alone. In my pajamas. On my mom's couch" (Retta, 2020).

Virtual ceremonies have many advantages, namely the possibility of attending regardless of distance, time zone, financial constraints or physical impairments. Despite this, and even though from a technical standpoint, it was well executed, virtual ceremonies carried out through Zoom or similar platforms were perceived as "sadder" and incapable of "measure up to the thrill of in-person hugs" (Retta, 2020). Media gave voice to such a disappointment and frustration manifold. Having experience in holding career seminars for students across the US, Amanda Sloat speaks of the feeling of "grief" and "loss" when undergoing "the abrupt end of classes, graduation rituals, and maybe opportunities for jobs or overseas study" (Sloat, 2020). Laura Rodríguez Presa, a bilingual journalist covering the Latino community in the Chicago area wrote in *Chicago Tribune* that graduation cancellations due to coronavirus were "bittersweet for first-generation grads and their families" (Presa, 2020). Tim Kreider, the author of two essay collections, and a frequent contributor to *Medium* and *The New*

**Image 1 /**

Cover of *Time* magazine (June 1/ June 8, 2020).

York Times speaks about how young people feel “as if their future has been canceled” and “abruptly truncated” (Kreider, 2020). In the *National Geographic*, Jordan Salama, a freelance writer who graduated from Princeton in 2019, wrote that “this year’s seniors have been robbed of the big-ticket items: spring sports seasons, beautiful blooming campuses, graduation rituals. And almost more heartbreaking are the little moments lost: the time to ease into life as an independent adult, to relax with friends in honor of all that you’ve accomplished, to talk about how you feel—those everyday anxieties and joys that help you figure out who you are” (Salama, 2020). Certainly not by chance, even *The Simpsons* gave a special and humorous “Commencement Speech to the Class of 2020”, appearing on camera in the iconic Zoom split screen format (The Simpsons, 2020).

From the Cloister into the Bedroom

On March 12th 2020, the Rector of the University of Évora addressed an email to the academy informing about the suspension of teaching activities and their replacement by distance learning from Monday, March 16th. The decision was followed by the Portuguese Government orientations, that the day after, on March 13th, decided to suspend teaching and non-teaching and training activities involving the presence of students in classroom teaching activities in all educational establishments (Decree-Law 10-A/2020, March 13). The state of emergency in Portugal lasted a month and a half, and it was decreed sequentially in 3 fortnightly periods, from March 22nd until May 2nd. Attentive to such developments, on March 31st the Rector clarified through an internal circular that excluding exceptional cases, there will be no more face-to-face classes in the academic year 2019/20 (Rectory of the University of Évora, 2020). With students already

at home, some of them miles away, the halls of the residence almost empty, and the final evaluations scheduled to take place online, the probability of canceling the graduation ceremonies expected for the last week of May increased every day.

At the University of Évora, the graduation ceremonies, broadly designated as “Queima das Fitas” [Ribbon Burning] include a wide range of activities, the organization of which is the specific responsibility of either the University of Évora Academic Association (AAUE) or the Council of Notables, “the academic body that has under its jurisdiction all issues of academic tradition at the University of Évora” (The Council of Notables, 2020c). The rectory of the University of Évora is an important and active partner, although it has no direct responsibility in the organization. Usually, the *Queima das Fitas* takes place in the last week of May, each year, during which students are formally excused from classes. Various activities take place during day and night, in a week that is mainly dedicated to fun and celebration amongst peers. An academic parade, and several sports and musical activities are organized, bringing together students from all years and attracting young people to the city in a festive atmosphere. The week ends on Saturday, its climax being witnessed by the students’ family and friends. Saturday morning there is a religious service in the cathedral and in the late afternoon, students are organized by courses and then called by name for a ceremony that takes place in the university building main cloister – Colégio do Espírito Santo. Therein, students dressed up in their black capes and accompanied by a godfather or godmother freely chosen by themselves receive congratulations from the rector. After that they drink a glass of wine, burn a white fabric ribbon and are taken by a limited number of chosen “special” people for a bath in an improvised pool. The ceremony

is full of symbolism, including the choice of godfathers and godmothers, the color of the ribbons and other ornamental artifacts taken by students, the burning, and the bath, that symbolically culminates a cycle that began years ago, in September, with the freshers welcome rituals, and especially on November 1st, the day of the University of Évora. According to the local academic tradition, on that day students formally assumed the status of fresh students of the University of Évora. Celebration extend into the night and overall, the *Queima das Fitas* gathers thousands of people, temporarily transforming the silent and austere cloister of the Jesuitical 16th century university in a festive, colorful and emotive space.

In 2020, none of this happened. The news arrived early in April. In an announcement posted on its Facebook profile, the AAUE informed that the *Queima das Fitas* event was postponed to October (AAUE, 2020, April 10). The concern “to safeguard public health in line with the recommendations of the rector of the University of Évora, the Directorate-General for Health and the Government of Portugal” was put as the main argument. Despite, and given the uncertainty of the future related to the evolution of COVID-19, the AAUE committed itself to continue working so that in 2020 students “will be able to live your academic week”, predictably in October “if all the security conditions for its realization are verified” (AAUE, 2020, April 10).

In May, on the first day the academic week would start, the AAUE posted on Facebook, together with a photo of the tent usually used to host the concerts, showing therein hundreds of students from a previous edition, the following message:

“Right now, many would be those who were preparing to start what would be

their last academic week, others would be running so that everything was ready to open doors and have another night full of stories to discover tomorrow.

Unfortunately, that possibility was removed by something more than nine nights of revelry, celebration, friendship, stories for life.

Together, we will come back stronger, to celebrate the small steps of those who could not know the Burning of the Ribbons of Évora in their first year, to celebrate the stories of those who finish, in the coming months, their link to the University of Évora or the arrival of new students.

From students to students, we will be coming back to this place soon!”
(AAUE, 2020, May 22).

On May 28th, the AAUE added an event to its Facebook titled “Homage Ceremony to Senior Students” scheduled to May 30th (Image 2). The image uses as a background a photograph of students partying, while in the foreground appears the monumental cloister of the university framed by the layout of a smartphone. The inscription “Facebook AAUE” leaves no doubt about the role of technology in virtually gathering people amidst a global pandemic for the 2020 graduating class.

A message posted the following day reinforced the idea of students being “united” while physically apart:

“Although we cannot be together, we remain united!

On this day, so special for our senior students, we couldn’t be indifferent!



Image 2 /

Image of the Homage Ceremony to Senior Students' facebook event. Source: AAUE Facebook profile.

Thus, we prepared a Homage Ceremony for all Senior Students. Invite your colleagues, your friends and live this musical moment.

We know it is not the same but believe us, soon we will be together again!

Share and enjoy this ceremony, this tribute. This moment is yours! From students to students.” (AAUE, 2020, May 29).

The message was posted again on May 30th and the ceremony livestreamed via Facebook from 9:30PM. The event consisted of a musical moment with invited artists. The cloisters were specially lit up for the show, but no senior students physically assisted, only some few invited people, including the rector. The 1:13:00 video remains online, and 74 related photos were uploaded on June 4th. Thousands of visualizations were made and comments and likes posted and shared among the online academic community and beyond (AAUE, 2020, May 30). Previously to the musical actuation, the rector of the University of Évora was called to go on stage. In her brief speech, while congratulating the senior students, she referred the impression caused on her by the “empty cloister”, and the intention to pay homage to the senior students of the 2020 class “someday, next year [2021]” (AAUE, 2020, May 30).

In turn, The Council of Notables prepared an homage video addressed to the senior students, posted on its webpage and YouTube on May 29th, along with the following text:

“Dear students,

Today would be the day when Évora would watch its streets flow with joy, when families would head to our city to share something so special with

their loved ones, when the Greater Cloister of Colégio do Espírito Santo would become even bigger and the stones of sidewalks would collect even more smiles, tears and stories to pass on to those who follow.

This year, due to the unusual situation we are experiencing, it will not be possible for our senior students to celebrate the Final Ceremonial on the desired date. For this reason, and aware that the Solemn Day of Queima das Fitas is one of the most remarkable days of the academic path, for all students and for the preservation of Academic Tradition, the Council of Notables of the University of Évora could not let this date pass in blank.

Thus, we share with you our testimony and an appeal to all students and supporters of the academic tradition, to put the student capes at the window as a symbolic gesture for today, which would be, for many, the culmination of the tradition.

Academic greetings. The Council of Notables.” (The Council of Notables, 2020a)

The video message orally explores the passage of time within the academic path, from September to November, and May, and from a fresh to a senior student. Tradition is recalled while students’ life milestones are highlighted. The video also talks about how the world changed and how the last few months have been “taken from us without the right to haggle”. Without explicitly referring to “COVID-19” or “pandemic”, the video is narrated in a kind of epic tone, using tradition to address students as “one of them”, as if knowing exactly how they feel about the “stolen present” while promising a

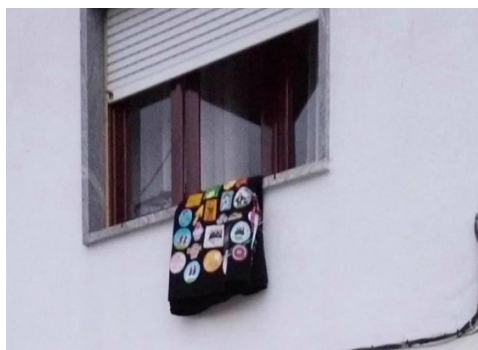


Image 3 /

Student cape hanging over the window. Photo by C. Costa (May 30th, 2020).



Image 4 /

Student cape hanging over the bedroom window. Photo by P. Costa (May 30th, 2020).

future that will be as good as the memories from a past lived by others can ensure. Images of happy past events keep looping while students are invited to believe and to wait for their “own day”, anticipating experiences to be lived and related feelings. It is a peer who, in a serene yet firmly tone, assures students the certainty among uncertainty: time will allow for a future opportunity to accomplish what in the present is impossible (The Council of Notables, 2020b).

Differently from the online streamed musical moment organized by the Academic Association, the Council of Notables invited each senior student and supporters of the academic tradition to take the ritual *inside* their houses. As a response to such an appeal, many students put their student capes at the window as a symbolic gesture (Image 3 and 4).

The photograph taken from inside the bedroom (Image 4) was purposely chosen as metaphorically it brings the reader closer to the experience of the senior student. The perspective from the inside out the bedroom is that of the student who looks hesitantly into the future, while symbolically its gesture brings together a seemingly personal experience to that of thousands of other senior students across the world.

September, Durkheim and We

May and September symbolically mark seasonal changes evoked by variations in light and weather, shaping activities, rhythms and patterns, and giving a socially meaningful definition to the passage of time along the year. For now, no one really knows what September 2020 will be like. Nevertheless, just as calendrical rites establish an ordered series of eternal beginnings as occurring periodically and predictably (Bell, 1997), so

September will continue to be perceived as a time of change and the beginning of a new academic year.

In the early 1900s, sociologist Émile Durkheim theorized that rituals are social facts, fostering unity among practitioners (Durkheim, 1912). They are not given by nature; it is the society that creates moments of “exceptional” time towards meeting specific purposes, notably social cohesion and collective commitment. Amid the global coronavirus pandemic, people are being forced to cancel, reschedule or postpone rituals. Many graduation ceremonies got “undone by COVID-19”. However, this does not unmake the ritual or compromises its power. Instead, reinforces it, as the ritual lives more on an imagined reality based on memory and anticipation, rather than an actual, fixed and immutable reality. In 2020, graduates comment that virtual graduation ceremonies “aren’t the same”, and that assisting such hallmark moments through two-dimensional screens or postponing it to the next year “will be different”. In fact, graduation wasn’t always “exactly the same” for previous generations as rituals – just as societies – are complex, dynamic and ever-changing. Differences among institutions, changes across time, student’s diverse cultural backgrounds, war, death and various losses, fear or refusal to mark an event openly explains different experiences, yet often overlooked in view of the “collective effervescence” (Durkheim, 1912) rituals usually imply.

Undoubtedly, COVID-19 pandemic has a major, unprecedented impact, not just on an individual or a small group, but on an entire cohort of students. In so doing, it doubly affirms the condition of liminality in which graduates find themselves. If before, already “betwixt and between” (Turner, 1964), because no more a student, not yet an adult

engaging in the “real world” and independent life; now globally sharing feelings of fear and uncertainty in the face of the future (Alter, 2020). The epidemiological evolution of the disease along with the economic instability and high unemployment jeopardizes job offers and opportunities for internships or overseas study, leaving the Class of 2020 more anxious about entering the workforce “without a clear way forward” (Law, 2020). Life goes on and rituals impose themselves coercively to us; nothing surprisingly new for anyone long interested in studying time and rituals. “The known and the unknown are available to us through rituals”, Imber-Black and Roberts once wrote (1993: 4), and the novel coronavirus comes but to remember that.

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