

# **A view of Teresa Ambrósio's work and life (1936-2007)**

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## **Introduction**

Teresa Ambrósio was a contemporary Portuguese leading woman scientist in the field of educational science. In this article, following a sociological perspective, an overview of her personal, academic, political and scientific life is presented, trying to insert her main functions and achievements in a wider context of the history of the country and the specific society where she lived. The article seeks to illustrate how her personality, political and social environment, as well as both challenges and supportive colleagues, friends and family shaped the citizen, the politician and the woman scientist who left an outstanding legacy for the Portuguese educational thinking. Thus, selected periods in Ambrósio's life and work are placed in a broader cultural-historical context.

One of the aims of this paper is to provoke a critical reflection on how a mother of four overcame traditional barriers women scientist face, at a time when female percentage at universities, both academics and students, was much lower than it is nowadays. It will also be shown how the interaction with other scientists and personalities she met have contributed to “interlace” a life that she described as a track, zigzagged pathways built up for, by, with the others.

## **Her personality**

Teresa Ambrósio was a passionate woman who would stand up for her ideology, her values and her beliefs. Those who knew her intimately describe her as sad and passionate at a time – *If I were musical, I would chose Wagner, quite dramatic, touching at times some pieces of Mozart*, she would write in 2003 (FACES DE EVA). Her sadness encompassed her physical fragility, two traits that she did not show unless in her intimacy. *Melancholic (...) but happy*, despite *the anguish of doing everything, of being everything, of finding myself*, deep inside, her objective was *the recognition of the*

*difference of being a woman in full, singular, hence free and responsible, loved and lovable.*

She possessed an accurate awareness both of her own limits and of her capabilities, in the sense that she sometimes felt unable to change mentalities and behaviours that did not meet her ideals. Notwithstanding that, her passion, her moral courage and intense desire drove her to a hunger of justice and to the fulfilment of the causes she believed in, no matter how difficult the obstacles she had to face might be. Barriers or closed doors challenged her to surpass and open them, and this trace of her personality has sometimes brought her sorrow and nuisance.

In fact, obstacles were challenges for her and she would constantly open new ways to apply scientific rigor to the social phenomena. Exceptionally cultivated, detached from material belongings, she was an example of an independent woman, who valued critical discussion and struggled for her ideals. As a woman of vision and intuition, she was able to seized up the way changing would occur, a perception that her systemic view of the world helped her capture the complexity of social phenomena.

Other than shaping her religious and moral development, and ruling her teaching practice by a most pronounced ethical and social implication, her personal characteristics made her an outstanding citizen woman who participated and influenced the Portuguese society not only in science, but also at the political and institutional level. Her influence on the Portuguese educational thought was remarkable, as well as her epistemological approach to research in educational science.

In the latest years of her life – maturity, as she would say – she also felt *the need of silence and time, for myself and by myself*, although she also felt a need of others – *those who are close and those who are far away but who are part of this globalised world that I embrace.*

I believe that not only her family, colleagues, students and friends who felt affection for her but also those who sometimes opposed her ideas will always remain impressed by the courage and dignity she lived both her life and her death.

## **Her life**

Maria Teresa Vieira Bastos Ramos Ambrósio was born in Vila Nova de Ourém, a small town in the centre of Portugal, in a rural medium class family of five children (one boy and four girls), all of them having followed a career. Her father, who had been educated

by the Jesuits, in Santo Tirso, ran a small business. Straightforward and with high moral standards, he was endowed with a good character. Teresa was the apple of his eyes; he always laid all his hopes on her. They were very attached to each other. Her relationship to her mother, a rather strict woman, was not so close. As a matter of fact, they had never got on really well.

Very young, Teresa was sent to a private school where she completed her secondary studies. After that, she went to Lisbon to study Chemical Engineering at Instituto Superior Técnico (IST). Later she decided to change the IST for the Faculty of Sciences, where she graduated in Physics and Chemistry. At the Instituto Superior Técnico she met an exceptionally cultivated woman who would have a deep influence on her political thought – Maria de Lourdes Pintasilgo<sup>1</sup> – an example of an independent, struggling woman, capable of developing discussions to find an ideal.

#### Political intervention as a University student

At the time Teresa Ambrósio was a university student, Portugal endured Salazar's dictatorship. Teresa joined JUC – the Catholic University Youth – one of the several movements who conspired against the political system in force. As a matter of fact, besides the communist, socialist and other political ideologies, also in the catholic milieu a movement was growing which would later be known as the “progressive Catholicism”, politically engaged in the struggle for social justice and human freedom, and later for peace in the Portuguese colonies in Africa (Rosas, 1994). Already in 1946, the Catholic journal *Trabalhador* (the Worker), whose director was a priest, had been locked up by Salazar's political police for its “Marxist style” and for “damaging the nation's soul” (idem). Also the first Congress of Catholic Men, in 1950, and the second Congress of the Catholic Youth Workers, in 1955, as well as the “Week for Rural Portuguese Studies”, in Fátima, where Oporto bishop denounced the “undeserved misery of the rural world”, were a demonstration of the growing awareness, by the Catholics, of the regime's inequities. As for the Catholic University Youth, having started their ideological separation from the regime since their first Congress, in 1953, they undertook, by the end of the year 1956 and beginning of 1957, an active intervention on the students' fight against a recent law which strongly diminished the autonomy of academic associations. Later, in July 1958, D. António Ferreira Gomes, the Oporto's bishop, would send Salazar a letter where he sharply criticized the

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<sup>1</sup> The only woman who was a prime minister in Portugal

authoritarian political regime, social injustices and the absence of freedom. Since then, although the Catholic hierarchy remained, in general, aligned with Salazar's policy, Christian "communities of base" started to develop attitudes of intervention and resistance (Rosas, 1994). Teresa Ambrósio, a member of JUC, was one of those activists, along with Maria de Lourdes Pintasilgo, Rogério Martins, Adérito Sedas Nunes, Xavier Pintado, and Vítor Constâncio, among others.

#### Professional life and first studies in France

Teresa Ambrósio's professional life encompassed her political intervention. After her graduation, she started working in the public planning sector, between 1966 and 1969. In 1965, a Cabinet of Studies and Planning of Educational Action had been created, in the Ministry of Education, which would later be designated by Cabinet of Studies and Planning (GEP), directed by Fraústo da Silva. In 1970, Fraústo da Silva invited Teresa Ambrósio to work in that Cabinet as the head of the planning sector for the schooling network developed during the educational reform of Veiga Simão, the new Ministry of Education. There, the first projects derived from educational research were systematically held in Portugal. Also in the scope of this Cabinet, several educational studies and research works were developed, namely in cooperation with OECD – Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. Teresa Ambrósio frequently attended OECD meetings in Paris, where her voice started to be listened to and her opinions taken into account.

Later Fraústo da Silva, who would become the rector of the New University of Lisbon, invited Teresa Ambrósio to collaborate in the launching of this university, where she would become an academic after her doctorate in Tours, France.

Meanwhile, she had got married and had four children. Her desire to meet new scientific thought made her inscribe in a Master Degree in Sociology of Development at the University of Grenoble, in France. This demanded a great deal of effort and willingness: her children were still very young and it was difficult to afford Teresa's studies abroad, especially because she often had to travel to and stay in France. It was no easy task for a Portuguese woman in the 1960s. Fortunately, Teresa Ambrósio could count on family – her two sons and two daughters used to stay with her husband and her parents in law, when she was absent.

As far as the political context of the country is concerned, Salazar had been replaced, in 1968, by Marcelo Caetano, who showed some "openness" compared to the strict authoritarian Salazar's regime. Even so, mainly since 1970, the regime was widely

contested, both by all the intellectual and proletarian leftwing and by the progressive Catholics, who were against the war in the colonies, and whose opinions were expressed, for example, in the «vigil for peace», in a Lisbon chapel, between 30th December 1973 and 1st January 1974: an occupation of the temple with a hunger strike by part of the presents and several speeches against the war in the colonies. All this contestation had a difficult economical background – inflation growing higher and higher – and a degradation of the social climate.

On April 25th 1974, José Veiga Simão was the Portuguese Minister of Education. By the organic law of his Ministry, a global reform of the structures and services of the Ministry of Education, especially of its central administration had been undertaken. Veiga Simão took on the principle of *educational democratisation* in order to “educate men and women in freedom and responsibility for Common wellbeing”. Besides the creation of new schools at all educational levels, between 1970 and 1974, new teacher training methods, new educational curricula, new courses and new teaching methodologies were implemented. There was also a huge increase of the secondary education and a diversification and expansion of higher education. Under his reform, in August 1973, the New University of Lisbon, Aveiro and Minho Universities and Évora University Institute were created, as well as Polytechnic Institutes in Coimbra, Lisbon, Oporto and Santarém. In April 1974, the New University of Lisbon, where Teresa Ambrósio worked, was in full regime of installation, having Fraústo da Silva as the rector. A change in Teresa’s personal life had occurred in the meantime – she divorced when her four children were still very young.

#### The 25<sup>th</sup> of April – the door wide open

The Portuguese revolution of the 25<sup>th</sup> April 1974 gave Teresa Ambrósio the opportunity to actively participate in the political and social change of the country. She became a militant of the Socialist Party and was one of the few women to be a member of the constituent assembly. She was a Deputy for the Socialist Party between 1975 and 1983, and was the president of the Parliament Commission for the Female Condition; besides, she was the vice-president of the Socialist Party Parliament Group and of the Parliament Commission for Education.

Founded in 1973 in Bad Munstereifel, the main constituents of the Portuguese Socialist Party were Marxists dissidents from the Portuguese Communist Party, followed by a second core part of historical republicans almost all of them linked to the Freemasonry, and a third group constituted by the Catholics from the 1960s coming from the JUC

(University Catholic Youth) and JOC (Labourer Catholic Youth), linked to the Catholic Church social doctrine. In the Socialist Party, Teresa Ambrósio worked with and was influenced by Francisco Salgado Zenha, who would also work with her in the IED (Institute for Studies and Development that she had created.). Again she would work close to Maria de Lourdes Pintasilgo, an outstanding woman also in the socialist party namely in issues related to education and female condition.

As Reis (1994) remarks, significant changes were occurring in the structural composition of the Portuguese society, which contributed to the institutional disruption in 1974. With democracy new movements emerged and those previously sketched were reinforced. One of the most important is the changing in the women's social status – female professionalism, changing in marital relationships and a remarkable break of birth-rate. Another dynamics in the Portuguese society is the women's search for personal independency and professional achievement. Maria Teresa Ambrósio's personality and willingness to deepen her knowledge and to struggle for personal and professional achievement in a society which, in many aspects, was still a men's world, decided to continue her studies, this time at Tours University where, in 1986, she concluded her PhD in Educational Science, brilliantly passing a *Doctorat d'Etat*. At that time she was working at the New University of Lisbon and had met her second husband, the architect Martins Barata, who would be her companion for the rest of her life.

Evolution in the Portuguese society made women become more and more active in their professional life, while, on the other hand, they had to take care of their personal life, often divided between their jobs and their household, their children, their domestic life. Maria Teresa Ambrósio was aware of all these difficulties, inasmuch as she had decided to live a full life, both professionally and at the personal level. This explains why, when she was the President of the National Educational Council, she was one of the subscribers of the manifesto supporting the international project “For an active society”, the mentor of which was, in Portugal, Maria de Lourdes Pintasilgo. This project, in the scope of the IV Communitarian Programme for equality of opportunities between men and women, 1996-2000, aimed to find innovative ways to conciliate family and professional responsibilities both for men and women. Themes for reflection were: “changing the way we think and discussing the way we live”; “discussing the social roles traditionally assigned to men and women” or “equality of opportunities to participate both in public and in private life”.

Teresa Ambrósio was the only woman so far to chair the National Educational Council (Conselho Nacional de Educação) between 1996 and 2002. She was also a consultant both for the European Communities and for the UNESCO for the areas of Education, Higher Education and Training, member of the International Francophone Association of Educational Research and a member of the Executive Council of the European Network *Modélisation de la Complexité* (Complexity Modelling), represented in Portugal by *Atelier 34*. She was also a representative member of the Lisbon Academy of Sciences and gave her collaboration to the Portuguese Foundation for Science and Technology for the evaluation of many projects, and research scholarships, as well as research units, coordinating panels in the field of Educational Science. She participated in CNAVES (The National Council for the Evaluation of Higher Education), and was one of the leading founders of AMONET – The Portuguese Association of Women in Science.

### **The woman scientist**

At the scientific level, Teresa Ambrósio was first influenced by Yves Barel, an economist, historian, philosopher and epistemologist of social science, the director of her Master in Sociology at Grenoble University of Social Sciences, France. Barel introduced Teresa to the systems analysis. She started to have a new scientific interest – the complexity approach for the understanding of social phenomena, an interest that would prevail until the end of her life. Barel advised her to meet Georges Lerbet, at the Tours University; this scientist would become a major reference for Teresa Ambrósio and he would also be the director of her PhD thesis in Educational Science. Through Lerbet, other influences – many coming from a scientific collaboration – emerged: Edgar Morin, Jean-Pierre Dupuy, LeMoinge among others. Teresa Ambrósio participated in the Cerisy Conferences, France, and she was a member of several international scientific networks. Mainly francophone, she would be open to other trends, coming from other countries and cultures.

#### Main scientific concerns

Teresa Ambrósio believed in the power of education in general and lifelong learning in particular to enhance Human Development, which she defined as *the ultimate goal of every policy that contributes for dignity and training of human capacities following the values of the global ethics that the contemporaneity has already acquired as an*

*historical civilisation patrimony*. The ethical dimension of her thought made her often criticise the *economical functionality, with a short time logics of technological assimilation assigned to school systems*, and she warned about the urgency of diffusing the contemporary educational thought to avoid that society can be guided, in a blind way, for a purely utilitarian vision of education. She would remind that human beings are far more than human resources and that human development is more than human resources development. Calling for values as *long-lasting and historical beliefs of communities*, she stood for the necessity to *recreate ethics of discussion* for the exercise of active and responsible citizenship that values politics, giving it a new logic and establishing its autonomy towards the economics.

She also emphasised the role of networks in knowledge sharing and knowledge creation – formal and informal networks, scientific networks, and those networks that grow within civil society – NGO (she was one of the main founders of AMONET – the Portuguese Association of Scientist Women), volunteer associations and others, which grow stronger and stronger not only as places of work and where people help one another, but also as spaces for knowledge sharing and creation of new knowledge. Teresa Ambrósio advocated that *knowledge* is the great capital of humanity, not only as economic capital, contributing to technological innovation, but also as a basis for our survival as human beings and, because it is so, knowledge should be shared by everyone.

In fact, contemporary societies are built around a set of imbricate networks – local, national, regional and global – that actually are learning networks and can support both individuals and groups that can find there a set of resources to reach their different goals and allow them to view life as a continuous and advantageous learning process.

Although technology is not enough and a more intensive and organised participation of society as a whole is needed, it is unquestionable that information and communication technologies have opened new potentialities to the creation of other knowledge sharing places – virtual networks. I think Teresa Ambrósio conceived networks as “knowledge trees”, in Humberto Maturana’s terminology, without hierarchies, in dynamic and creative unities, which favour linkages, interchange, connections, and the sense of belonging.

However, a network is complex – as Teresa Ambrósio used to remind – it has multiple causalities and interdependences; it is linked to the context in which it is inserted and to the singularity of the System-Person, with its *capacity for intentional action*. Because of

that she viewed European and international networks as *sources for questioning accumulated knowledge*, tested, enriched and constructed in logic of nonlinear rationality that could originate *interlaced meta-networks*, comprising *individual systems, people, enlarged groups*. Applied to the scientific field, the same logic is shared by Le Moigne, who refers the need to strengthen a collective practice of scientific reflexivity, based on permanent places of exchange and debates that allow researchers from different expertises to share their experiences and their queries about the science they do. Along the same line, and bearing in mind the complexity of social and human phenomena, Teresa Ambrósio argued for the need to find bridges to favour dialogue between centres of research, because of the interdependence of a set of problems.

Especially in the latest years of her life, she was passionate by the theory of complexity and systems thinking. Her scientific interests mainly concentrated on the relationships between education and sustainable human development, as well as in the processes of personal and communities' growth. She considered that, in the present knowledge society, educational systems are evolutionary systems, complex, unpredictable, bringing about the need to build frameworks for the intelligibility of their problems and behaviours through research, debate and social regulation. Aiming to apply research findings to real action, she believed in democratic participation both by society in general and by citizens responsible for the decision of possible pathways, under a permanent process of reflexivity leading to informed action. In our time of uncertainty, risk and unpredictability, she believed this procedure would design the governance models fitted to the future of Education, which she viewed as Education for the future.

She argued for the necessity of a vision of change and of the sustaining mechanisms of such change, not only at the organisational and institutional management levels, but also of the new processes of teaching and learning, of new disciplinary themes and fields, of new knowledge emerging from everywhere. Such issues should, she argued, be taken into account for global, dynamic, systemic, pluralistic evaluating criteria in the new Higher Education.

Another field of research that Teresa Ambrósio coordinated was lifelong learning. She believed that the new paradigm of lifelong learning implies a deep effort for the pedagogic and scientific reorganisation in what concerns disciplinary and interdisciplinary contents, educational, intellectual and professional development strategies. Such strategies should be supported by a reorganisation both at the

institutional level as a whole, and at the level of traditional management frameworks of the institution. More than institutional reforms she advocated new spaces of change, of innovation, where new orientations can be experimented for the higher education/research/training, and where the intervention of new academic actors, entrepreneurs and politicians can be promoted.

## **Conclusion**

Teresa Ambrósio was an outstanding woman scientist in the field of sociology and educational science. She fully lived her life, both personally and professionally, taking responsibility for her citizenship duties as well. A huge part of her time life was dedicated to the cause of Education and Democracy in her country. She gave her example, her stimulus and guidance to many students and teachers of the Universidade Nova de Lisboa (New University of Lisbon), especially to the researchers of the Unit of Research Education and Development. As she once said, she knew she would leave *many other paths interlaced* with her own one – *professional, political, familiar and emotional*. She directed several research groups at the New University of Lisbon (Unity of Research Education and Development) and her contribution to innovative research approaches in the field of Social and Educational Science has undoubtedly marked the scientific Portuguese panorama. Her capacity of synthesis, foresight, scientific intuition and vision through complexity were remarkable. She left a significant number of publications in the field of social and educational science. In 2003, when asked to write her self portrait, she wrote: *I am Teresa Ambrósio, I was born in 1937, in Vila Nova de Ourém, and I will die in a date to be named*. It would be on the 11<sup>th</sup> September 2006.

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