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# ISABEL BARCA: A PERSONAL PERSPECTIVE

HILARY COOPER\*

Isabel Barca has been a constantly recurring leitmotiv, with an important place in my personal narrative. In this chapter I reflect on the many brief and spasmodic but memorable occasions that have punctuated our professional lives, over thirty years.

## WHEN I FIRST HEARD OF ISABEL BARCA

As a history graduate, I taught in primary schools for a number of years, because at the time, this was far more intellectually innovative than teaching history in secondary schools. But by the mid-1980s I realised that exciting new ideas were emerging, re-thinking the purpose and nature of history in schools. These began with pamphlets by Jeanette Coltham and John Fines<sup>1</sup> and Peter Rogers<sup>2</sup> and the *Schools History Project* for 13-16-year-olds, which was set up in 1972. While continuing to teach I decided, in the late 1980s, to embark on my own doctoral research into *Young Children's Thinking in History*<sup>3</sup>. My supervisor at London University Institute of Education was Peter Lee. Researching pedagogy in history was unusual at the time, but when I met Peter after a summer vacation, he was very excited. He told me that he had been speaking about new approaches to history education at a conference in Portugal and to his amazement someone had responded in a very lively and enthusiastic way and asked him to supervise her PhD. in this innovative new area. Her name, he said, was Isabel Barca.

## WHEN I FIRST MET ISABEL

In 2004, when I was working at the University of Lancaster, I thought that it would be a good idea to organize a conference on History Education and Society at our Education Department in the small town of Ambleside, in the north-west of England. Dr. Jon Nichol, a colleague at the University of Exeter, said he would like to join me in this enterprise. We called our conference the History Educators Research Network. To our great surprise thirty-four participants, coming from every continent, presented papers at the conference. And to my amazement, a paper was submitted, on «Ideas on History and Orientation in Time: a study with beginning teachers» by someone from the Instituto de Educação e Psicologia, in the Universidade do Minho, Braga, Portugal.

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<sup>1</sup> COLTHAM & FINES, 1971.

<sup>2</sup> ROGERS, 1979.

<sup>3</sup> COOPER, 1991.

She was Isabel Barca. I was intrigued to be meeting with Isabel Barca and asked Peter Lee, «What is she like?» After consideration Peter replied, diplomatically, «very petite».

So I *was* not surprised when, on the first day of the conference a «very petite», smiling and dynamic lady with waist-length blond hair came towards me and embraced me. I was surprised, however, when she introduced the lively group of colleagues she had brought with her: Júlia Castro also from the Universidade do Minho and Olga Magalhães from the Universidade de Évora in Portugal, who were co-authors of her paper. I was even more impressed when Isabel introduced me to Tânia Braga Garcia and Maria Auxiliadora Schmidt from the Universidade do Paraná, in Curitiba, Brazil.

Maria Auxiliadora Schmidt and Tânia Braga Garcia told me about the research they had done for the paper they were presenting on «Teaching History, Based on Documents from the Family Archives: a social experiment with Brazilian Children». I still have the two published books resulting from the project, which Maria Auxiliadora presented me with. She had rehearsed a little speech for when she met me, saying, in halting English, «I did not know you would be such a sweet person». This ensured a long friendship with Isabel, Maria and their many colleagues!

It was a friendship which grew as we continued to meet regularly, through the following History Education International Research Network (HEIRNET) conferences, which Jon Nichol and I have organized annually since 2005.

Whenever I arrive at a HEIRNET Conference it is not long before I see a waving hand and laughing faces followed by hugs and kisses with Isabel and her surrounding group of colleagues and we are excitedly catching up with news and anecdotes about the previous year.

Isabel hosted the HEIRNET conference at the University of Minho in 2011 and Maria Auxiliadora hosted the conference at the Universidade do Paraná in 2012.

## **ISABEL'S HEIRNET CONFERENCE AT THE UNIVERSIDADE DO MINHO**

The HEIRNET conference in 2011 was hosted by Isabel, at the University of Minho. I have vivid memories of the amazing Grande Hotel Bom Jesus, where I had decided to stay. This was, perhaps, not the most convenient hotel for the University, so Isabel and her students arranged daily transport for me. I vividly remember the Stations of the Cross leading up 116 meters to the hotel and the Bom Jesus do Monte Cathedral, where Peter Lee had advised me to search for the remains of a long deceased cardinal. I found it! I also remember going with Helena Pinto on a conference tour of the ancient buildings of Guimarães, the subject of her doctoral research.

## MARIA AUXILIADORA'S HEIRNET CONFERENCE AT THE UNIVERSIDADE DO PARANÁ

The following year I met Isabel at the HEIRNET conference in the University of Paraná, in Curitiba, Brazil, hosted by Isabel's friend, whom I had first met in Ambleside and was now also my friend, Maria Auxiliadora Schmidt. I remember Isabel coming into my hotel while I was finishing my breakfast and dragging me out in a hurry, explaining that everyone was waiting for me to open the conference. I had memorised a little speech in Portuguese and was trying desperately to remember it as we crossed the road. Isabel presented a paper, with Júlia Castro, Helena Pinto and Graça Sanches about identity and inter-culturality in history education, comparing the ideas of Cape Verdean and Portuguese students. That conference was memorable for so many reasons. I remember Isabel pulling me onto a table with her in Curitiba market place to dance, against my inclination as I do not dance... I think I was supposed to be one of the Three Graces. However since the eminent Professor, Jörn Rüsen, was already on his feet I was in good company. I remember the visit to the Atlantic Forest to drink cane sugar and to a restaurant in Morretes — where Helena Pinto had a bowl of *barreado* turned upside-down over her head to demonstrate its solid texture. Oh — and we had been looking forward to bikinis and beaches — it was July — but due to a freak weather condition, the temperature was -3°C. I gave my presentation wearing a coat and a hotel blanket. Great fun!

## ISABEL'S RESEARCH

Unfortunately I cannot read Portuguese so I cannot do justice to an appreciation of Isabel's overall research output but an overview of her presentations at HEIRNET over the years clearly reflects three characteristics: wide-ranging research interests, benefitting a variety of groups of people, by making theory/practice links and supporting colleagues.

### Wide-ranging research interests

The common theme that runs through a number of Isabel's presentations is the importance of interpretations of the past, how they eliminate the idea of an imposed fixed view of the past and how relevant this is to personal identity. And for Isabel this is not just an academic notion, to be acknowledged in the process of historical enquiry. It is relevant and personal to students' understanding of the past. Indigenous Portuguese students construct their own narratives of their national past. Immigrants to Portugal may have different perspectives. What ideas do students construct about the African to Brazil slave trade? How is Arab history conveyed in textbooks? How do primary school children in Angola think about the past? It is generally thought that school history should

have a global dimension, that it should engage children and that it should be relevant to their lives. Isabel's research makes the concept of interpretations intercultural, engaging and relevant. It examines the ways in which people construct history.

Isabel's presentations at HEIRNET conferences reflect the variety of her research questions. In 2005 she spoke about «History and Orientation in Time», in London, in 2006, she described researching «How Children Make Sense of Historic Streets» and in Istanbul in 2007 she was researching «Identities in History». In Northern Ireland (2009) she told us about «Portuguese Students' accounts of Different versions of the Past» and in New York in 2010 she presented a challenging model of history education. At the Ljubljana HEIRNET she focused on «Arab history in Portuguese Text Books» and London, in 2015, she was talking about time orientation again, this time comparing the views of Portuguese students with those of Portuguese-speaking students in Brazil. HEIRNET was in Murcia in 2016, and Isabel presented research on «Portuguese Students Voices about their National Contemporary Past». The next year in Dublin she spoke about a study with Portuguese students about «Constructing ideas about slavery and the slave traffic from Africa to Brazil». In Corfu she told us how immigrant families in Portugal understand their history and in 2018 conference in Vienna she spoke about the local perspective of history education in a school in Angola. Isabel's HEIRNET research papers reflect both a wide variety of questions, about time, local and national history, identities, interpretations, including those involving slavery and immigration. They also embrace diverse geographical areas: Hispanic countries, Arab history, slavery from Africa to Brazil and Angola.

### **Benefits of Theory/Practice Links**

Isabel's research and the research she has supervised is also relevant because it is undertaken, sometimes with student teachers, sometimes with practising teachers and sometimes with school pupils. It involves students in exploring their own thinking in order to understand how this may be applied to school students both inside and outside the classroom. And it explores teachers' practice, not only by helping them to reflect on their practice but also to consider how, in the light of these reflections, to develop and improve their practice so there is little doubt that it has impact.

The research in Isabel presents at HEIRNET is not esoteric but is of practical benefit to different constituencies. For example, the 2005, 2007, 2009 and 2016 papers inform teacher educators about the thinking of student teachers, the 2006 paper supports teachers in planning effective local history for their pupils. Isabel's 2014 paper enables teachers to evaluate the textbooks they use with children and the children who will ultimately be the most important beneficiaries live not only in the Iberian Peninsula, but also in South America, Africa — and anywhere penetrated by the world of HEIRNET!

## Supporting colleagues

There are many people who are grateful to Isabel for introducing them to research in history education at Masters and Doctoral level and who went on themselves to be members of the research community. And beyond introducing them to the idea of research she supervised them with enthusiasm, understanding and genuine support. And when they had been awarded their doctorates she worked alongside them, researching collaboratively with them.

Isabel researches collaboratively, sharing research presentations and introducing colleagues to presenting at conferences. For example «How Children Make Sense of Historic Streets; walking through downtown Guimarães» was an aspect of Helena Pinto's doctoral study. Helena in turn presented papers in Dublin in 2017, with Ana Isabel Ponce and Jorge Ortuño and with Alex Ibáñez. She also presented research with Mariana Lagarto, another of her successful doctoral students, whose research on the impact of interventions in history lessons enhanced the practice of participant teachers. In Dublin Isabel presented research done with Ana Paula Squinelo and Glória Solé.

## ISABEL'S CONTRIBUTION TO HEIRNET

### Networking

Over fifteen years Isabel's dynamic presence contributed to the friendly ethos of HEIRNET conferences. Her sense of style and sense of fun was much appreciated.

I remember an incident she told us about in Istanbul when she marched her colleagues into what she thought was a ladies' tea garden — but it turned out to be something quite different. Isabel introduced many supportive colleagues to HEIRNET. This strengthened the intercontinental growth and status of the history education research community and the development of multi-perspectival and disciplinary approaches to history education.

## MY EXPERIENCE OF A JORNADAS

Isabel clearly did not sit in her office doing and supervising research. She established a series of annual conferences on history education, at the University of Minho. I became aware of this when I was invited to speak at the fourth Jornadas Internacionais de Educação Histórica in 2004. The structure was four guests speaking about their research on aspects of historical enquiry, followed by ten speakers from the University on pedagogical supervision, translating theory into practice in the classroom and the relevance of historical thinking to society. Again this reflects the ways in which Isabel involved students and colleagues and made connections between theory, teaching, school-based work and its significance for wider society.

## PROFESSORSHIP

So it was not surprising that, in 2010(?), Isabel applied for a professorship at the University of Minho. For me, becoming a professor had simply involved an interview with the Pro Vice Chancellor of my university, who convened a meeting of Professors from other institutions to discuss my Curriculum Vitae and decide whether to offer me a chair. He contacted me on his mobile the following day to ask me what professorial title I should like. I was later feted at my inaugural lecture and everyone attending was given a splendid tea.

I found, to my surprise, I was invited to be one of the three professors who were to conduct the «assessment» of Isabel's application. I discovered that in Portugal, as I think is usual in Europe, this is a public, formal and intimidating affair. I met Isabel's colleagues for lunch, before being taken to an enormously impressive and ancient building. I think it was a part of the Bishops' Palace. First I had to confer with my fellow professors, one from Spain and one from Catalonia. To be honest I am not sure that the concept of constructivist approaches in history education were, at that time, as well-established in the Iberian Peninsula as they have become since. There was a language barrier, of course, but I was not sure that the other judges shared my views.

We were then taken to sit on a platform at the end of a large hall, where an expectant audience was gathered. Isabel was seated at a lectern, which was, if I recollect correctly, on a much lower level, than the judges' platform, facing partly towards the audience and partly to the judges. She had to give a presentation, which each «judge» had to then question her about and she had to defend. I don't know how Isabel felt but I found it stressful! Anyhow, with her usual cool and charm she performed brilliantly. Yet I feared, when we returned to sit in a room with a large round table, to discuss the outcome of Isabel's performance, that there might be a prolonged discussion. But we all immediately agreed to recommend a professorship. They do make you earn your Chair in Portugal! Afterwards I met Isabel and her friends in a nearby café and Isabel introduced me to her delightful grandson, who was then about nine years old.

## A FITTING CONCLUSION

As a Professor, Isabel's work has continued to flourish. On December 1st 2019 she sent me an email, in which she said that the Jornadas «has become a considerably relevant event in the Portuguese-speaking world and it is spreading now among the Ibero-American countries». Well, Isabel, you have played a big part in making this a reality. In this email, as a member of the organizing committee, Isabel also invited me to be a keynote speaker in the 2020 Jornadas in Porto, which will be focused on learning and research in history education. I think that endorses the significant and enthusiastic part that Isabel has played in constantly finding ways in which we can think more deeply

about the role of history education in all societies, how young people, at different ages can actively engage with the past and how we as educators can help them to do so in ways that are interesting and enjoyable.

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