

INVISIBLE

The path to immortality.

BY JOÃO RAMALHO-SANTOS

He slid out of bed as the door closed behind the nurse who regularly came by to check if he was still breathing. Avoidance was always best; unlike academia, this was a place where quick wits were greeted, not by admiration, but with increased doses of meds. Keeping them controlled was the only goal. Nurses weren't impressed by who their charges had been; they dealt with ex-politicians, ex-actors, ex-chief executives, ex-everything, focus on the 'ex'. The trick was to be invisible, to walk the fine line between polite privacy and antisocial sullenness. Rather than musing on 'how it had come to this', he took it for what it was: a new challenge.

Today, however, the wait had been excruciating, a package beckoning just outside the door. The nurse never brought the mail in, not part of the job description. But it was there; he knew it, next-day shipping never failed. Fifteenth edition. Two shelves on the bookcase held the fourteen previous ones, a steady increase in bulk following the chronology. In fact, these were the only books he had bothered to bring. He opened the door, trying to will away telltale creaks in hinges and joints, avoid any possible attention. But a small envelope was all that awaited.

A sudden surge of adrenaline-flavoured fear gushed through him. The publishing company had gone all-digital. Inside the envelope would be a DVD, a USB pen, a code to access some website far away. No longer the heaviness of textbooks, the rustle of knowledge to be thumbed through, the smell of fresh ink; just jumps, links and animations, information beaten into easy morsels. Yet another challenge, he mused, firing up the laptop, searching for glasses, battling arthritis for the envelope's contents.

The chapter was not where he expected; the new authors had wanted to shift things around, leave their mark. Wouldn't work: by now the book was known by a sole last name, and that original author had been dead since the tenth edition, his name transitioning from scholar to brand. But even creative authors couldn't escape the obvious organizations in science, he thought, finding what he was looking for.

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One introductory line.
"It has long

been well established that..." No references were given. The chapter then proceeded to describe what had recently happened in the field. Why, the new authors must have thought, reference the obvious at the beginning? They had merely added what seemed like a million links at the end, for those with a taste for the historical. He grinned, gazed at the bookcase.

The first four editions he forgave, only the drive for completeness justified their purchase. He was in high school when the first two came out, in college for the others. The fifth he had learned to understand. When it was published he had only presented at a meeting, and at the time hadn't even been fully aware of what the data meant. It was the sixth and seventh he had real issues with. By then his PhD thesis had been completed, the data published, their implications clear. Yet it remained ignored, just a few odd details that didn't quite fit accepted dogma, certainly not enough to warrant the rewriting of textbooks, as one helpful professor candidly explained. So he formed his own lab to

work on the 'odd details'. Luckily these were the old days, funding for non-canonical work was still easy, if off the beaten prestige path. He published like mad, bothered editors, made sure the eighth and ninth editions had to reluctantly state: "Despite a general consensus this may not be the case in very particular circumstances." Finally he was referenced, the work tangible; even though any casual reader understood the textbook was being, at best, charitable. By edition number ten his relentless campaign had got others to pay attention, to try out his hypotheses. No longer the ramblings of a lone maverick, the text finally admitted that there were competing views, suggested that resolving this issue would be a challenge for the future.

And the future came through in editions eleven to thirteen, his work gradually becoming the "general consensus", the previous fading into afterthought. The thirteenth edition was particularly satisfying because he had since retired, the ideas no longer dependent on his own stubbornness, but on the best truth available.

Five years ago, when he first read the fourteenth, he had to admit to a twinge of disappointment. "Initial theories were contradicted by work that clearly established..." the chapter said, still referencing his papers. Nothing else. It was as if the fiery battles discussed in previous editions, and that his entire career was based upon, hadn't happened at all. But slowly he understood the bigger picture, realized what the next edition, what all future versions, would have to say.

And fifteen did. The controversy was dead, to resurface in other chapters on the history of the field, but not useful in day-to-day practice, realm of the "well-established". Later he would check if Wikipedia and Google Scholar agreed, but the grin was already turning into his first real smile in years. Regardless of all the awards and accolades, the true pinnacle of the academic profession had now been reached. Peers considered his work good enough to be truly immortal. And here too he was finally invisible. ■

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