Anuário Antropológico
ISSN: 2357-738X
anuario_antro@unb.br
Universidade de Brasília
Brasil

Agier, Michel
On “Scales, levels of agency, and condensation” by Gustavo Lins Ribeiro
Anuário Antropológico, vol. 48, núm. 2, 2023, Mayo-Agosto, pp. 42-47
Universidade de Brasília
Brasília, Brasil

DOI: https://doi.org/10.4000/aa.11080

Disponible en: https://www.redalyc.org/articulo.oa?id=599874672004

Anuário Antropológico

v.48 n.2 | 2023
2023/v.48 n.2

On “Scales, levels of agency, and condensation” by Gustavo Lins Ribeiro

Sobre “Escalas, níveis de agência e condensação”, de Gustavo Lins Ribeiro

Michel Agier

Édition électronique
URL : https://journals.openedition.org/aa/11080
DOI : 10.4000/aa.11080
ISSN : 2357-738X

Éditeur
Programa de Pós-Graduação em Antropologia Social (UnB)

Édition imprimée
Pagination : 42-47
ISSN : 0102-4302

Référence électronique
Michel Agier, « On “Scales, levels of agency, and condensation” by Gustavo Lins Ribeiro », *Anuário Antropológico* [En ligne], v.48 n.2 | 2023, mis en ligne le 28 août 2023, consulté le 18 novembre 2023.
URL : http://journals.openedition.org/aa/11080 ; DOI : https://doi.org/10.4000/aa.11080

Anuário Antropológico

v.48 n.2 | 2023
2023/v.48 n.2

On “Scales, levels of agency, and condensation” by Gustavo Lins Ribeiro

Sobre “Escalas, níveis de agência e condensação”, de Gustavo Lins Ribeiro

Michel Agier

Edição electrônica
URL: http://journals.openedition.org/aa/11080
DOI: 10.4000/aa.11080
ISSN: 2357-738X

Editora
Programa de Pós-Graduação em Antropologia Social (UnB)

Referência eletrônica
Michel Agier, «On “Scales, levels of agency, and condensation” by Gustavo Lins Ribeiro», *Anuário Antropológico* [Online], v.48 n.2 | 2023. URL: http://journals.openedition.org/aa/11080 ; DOI: https://doi.org/10.4000/aa.11080

anuário antropológico
v. 48 • nº 2 • maio-agosto • 2023.2

On “Scales, levels of agency, and condensation” by Gustavo Lins Ribeiro

Sobre “Escalas, níveis de agência e condensação”, de Gustavo Lins Ribeiro

DOI: https://doi.org/10.4000/aa.11080

Michel Agier
Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales (EHESS, Paris)
Institut de Recherche pour le Développement (IRD, Marseille) – France

ORCID: 0000-0002-3416-4332
agier@ehess.fr

Michel Agier is an anthropologist, Professor at École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales (EHESS – School of Advanced Studies in the Social Sciences), as a member of the Centre d’études des mouvements sociaux (CEMS – Center for the study of social movements), and Emeritus Senior Researcher at Institut de Recherche pour le Développement (IRD - French National Research Institute for Sustainable Development). Following former research in urban anthropology and racial and ethnic studies in Africa, Brazil and Colombia, since 2000 he has conducted and coordinated fieldwork in Africa and Europe on border situations, refugees and migrants.

The whole practice of an anthropology of the contemporary – and the questions that arise from this practice – are remarkably "condensed," so to speak, in this article by Gustavo Lins Ribeiro (GLR). The contemporary world that any anthropologist may set out to study is defined not through a monographic and myopic gaze (typical to the ethnological tradition that still forms part of our legacy, after all), but through an exploration of the connections between ethnographic observation and diverse levels of constraints and forces – connections that are too quickly summarized by the local/global formula. It seems to me more precise to say that this contemporary world may be understood through a relationship between situation and context. The situation is what I can observe and experience directly; the context is what I cannot see immediately, but can grasp through different procedures, more or less concrete or abstract, more or less empirical or theoretical. What mediates between the two? This is my understanding of the question that occupies GLR in his article. It is rich in the domain of the self-reflexivity and epistemology of anthropology – indeed, of any field-based social science. All the article's proposals and observations are fascinating and inspirational. They inspire me to *think with them*, to question, compare and develop the author's ideas. In this commentary, I shall mention just a few of the avenues for further study suggested by the article, in light of my own practice.

The first point is the very idea of *scales*. I read the article as a post-scriptum contribution to an already distant but major work for French-language researchers, in which historians of Italian *micro-storia* and French anthropologists of contemporary situations intercrossed their experiences and methods of analysis with regard to "scale playing" (*jeux d'échelles*: see Revel 1996). Like the *jinga* of Brazilian capoeira, *jeu* in French should be understood here in the dual sense of both a "game" – an exercise or sport – and a "play," allowing a certain flexibility or freedom left to interpretation and imagination. As the saying goes, *faire jouer les échelles* (to play with scales). The approach adopted in this earlier collective work did not favor any particular scale *a priori* but subjected each instance to specific experimentation. I understand GLR to do the same in this article.

My commentary begins precisely with the idea that "scale is an empirical fact." Although I do not immediately recognize myself in this assertion, it does open up a whole area of discussion, which I would like to pursue here. For me, "scale" is rather a tool of representation and/or analysis that everyone uses to a greater or lesser extent to understand social life, whether through the spontaneous sociology of actors, or through the practice of description and analysis in the social sciences. I would add that these representations of scale are also a political issue that is becoming, in today's world, highly explicit and even crucial – something GLR does not develop in this text but is clearly very familiar with through his reflections elsewhere on "popular cosmopolitanism" and cosmopolitics (Ribeiro 2014). I am talking about the *political* dimension of scales when, very directly, some far-right parties today define themselves as "anti-globalization" ("nationalists" versus "globalists," we hear in France); or when the most radical ecologist movements take up the proposals of Murray Bookchin's "neo-communalism" (2018[1990]),

Anu. Antropol. (Brasília) v. 48, n. 2, pp.42-47. (maio-agosto/2023). Universidade de Brasília. ISSN 2357-738X. https://doi.org/10.4000/aa.11080

which presents the municipal scale as the foundation of the most authentic democracy, thanks to its local anchorage, which alone enables direct democracy; or when those activists who called themselves "alter-globalists" in the 1990s found themselves represented in the concept of "cosmopolitan consciousness" ardently defended by Ulrich Beck (2006), yet this last position is not anymore able to be heard in public debate, given the widespread rejection of the idea of the "global" in political discourse. This proximity, and sometimes confusion, between common representations, political ideologies and the language of the social sciences, confirms that the world of research and concepts does not inhabit an "ivory tower." This leads me to a first question addressed to GLR, which aims to foreground the political stakes and effects of any epistemological discussion based on this reflection on scales, and more broadly to take into account the fundamentally critical dimension of the anthropology of the contemporary. Does taking up this question not always imply a public anthropology, an engagement of the social sciences, with their concepts and the complexity of their reasoning, in public debates, even at the risk of losing one's friends?

Moreover, this discussion on scales and the proximity between common representations, political ideologies and social science concepts, also shows their limits and justifies the need, as GLR proposes, to complicate or "go beyond" the point of view of scales. This idea leads me to go further, perhaps, and insist on the pseudo-realism of scale. Believing that scale is reality and that we can "jump" it (scale-jumping) or "bend" it (scale-bending) ends up reifying or even "ontologizing" scale, at the risk of no longer seeing anything. In my opinion, this is also what happens with the idea of "concentric circles," despite the laudable attempt to go beyond them with the idea of transversal or transnational flows, as practiced by GLR. Of course, metaphors help us to find in other languages the words we need to invent our concepts: a mathematical metaphor for "scale," a geometrical metaphor for "concentric circles," a physical metaphor for "condensation," an industrial metaphor for "reduced model," et cetera. Epistemological vigilance means avoiding the abstract logic of metaphor. Ethnography shows us that, starting from the situations observed, what we call "scales" are deconstructed in the description of the networks and forces at work "*in situ*." Like GLR, I think that this discussion brings us back to the field evidence.

From this point of view, the proposed connection with the notions of "size" and "level" is important since it takes us back to the work of researchers (historians, geographers and anthropologists) when they face the uninterrupted chaotic flux of facts and try to put them in order, classify or structure them, and make sense of them. "Size" is certainly a very useful dimension for anthropologists (and a way of going beyond the idea of scale without "distorting" reality), both because size is more directly descriptive (or measurable) and because it allows us to move towards what lies at the heart of the anthropological approach, namely finding *what makes a community*. Human size (which I prefer to "smallness") is the condition of possibility for the anthropologist's investigation, insofar as it means the possibility for anthropologists to directly observe and experience social relations

for themselves. The community most probably corresponds to the Levi-Straussian *modèle réduit* mentioned by GLR. It is the "object" that can be described and analyzed as a whole in the way of Mauss and Lévi-Strauss, but the question that remains, here too, is whether and how it is connected to the surrounding world. Lévi-Strauss does not tell us, even when he defends the idea, after Mauss, that the size of a small totality (or community) makes it possible to argue that "the whole precedes the part" and allows us to posit, methodologically, that we must see our object from the outside before and after seeing it from the inside (Mauss 1950, Lévi-Strauss 1950). For an anthropology of practices in their contemporary context, this option is insufficient and can lead to the dead end of the somewhat out-of-this-world monograph.

So I agree with GLR when he suggests breaking this deadlock by evoking the question of networks. We can indeed make things more complex (or better account for the complexity of things) by using the analytical tool of the network. Before Bruno Latour's "actor-network," it is worth remembering that "network analysis" was one of the major contributions of the Manchester School in the 1950s, based on fieldwork in the mines and industries, cities and colonial contexts of Central Africa (Schumaker 2001). I developed this network approach to think about the anthropological dimension of urban existence and – in particular, in Brazil – to reflect on the "familiar city" even in metropolitan contexts (Agier 2011). Furthermore, much earlier, it was this network approach that Ulf Hannerz (1980) used as a reference in his description of the anthropological model of the city as "the network of networks," long before this became the definition commonly given to the internet and Ulf Hannerz (1992) himself approached globalization in terms of "cultural flows." This prompts another question for GLR: is ethnographic study of the web not the best way to question and transcend scales? Empirically situated both in the hyper-micro-locality of the hand-held smartphone and in the most indefinite globality, towards what new worlds and new lifestyles are internet-mediated social relations moving? Today, we are all contemporaries of the same world (Augé 1999, 2017), marked by a general sense of the instantaneity and ubiquity of images and practices – two dimensions, space and time, that GLR considers as the major occurrences of "scales." Logically, therefore, the question that contemporary anthropology should be asking is: how do we rethink global ethnography in and from the centrality of the internet in social life?

I conclude my commentary with the example of mega-projects, which I regard as one of the exemplary cases of global ethnography. Indeed, as I said before, for the anthropologist, the practical question of analyzing an ethnographic observation concerns the relationship between situation and context. Since the Manchester School and the first steps in situational anthropology (Agier 2017), we have been questioning the presence of the context or even its "immanence (of the context) in the situation" (Bensa 1996, Bazin 1996), bearing in mind that, for the analysis, this context is not *a priori* national, global or local, but is defined instead as the set of forces acting in the observed situation – here we may meet with GLR's different "levels of agency." So, assuming I have understood the brief descriptions

Anu. Antropol. (Brasília) v. 48, n. 2, pp.42-47. (maio-agosto/2023). Universidade de Brasília. ISSN 2357-738X. https://doi.org/10.4000/aa.11080

correctly, we can say that mega-projects are *localized global situations*. The comparison with the humanitarian *dispositif* (or network) is tempting. Based on her investigations into humanitarian intervention in Kosovo in the 1990s, Mariella Pandolfi (2000) conceptualized the "moving sovereignty" of humanitarianism and its colonizing power as a global power taking possession of local territories and their governance. But, of course, everything is always negotiated and even in refugee camps created and managed by perfectly global forces (UNHCR, INGO), the lives of people in these places are also determined by relations with local, regional and national networks and forces, as well as with those of the refugees' places of origin, insofar as they are locally active. Similarly, in the case of the mega-projects analyzed by GLR, the mobility of foreign personnel intervening in another place or country at the company's request is comparable, it seems to me, to the "banal cosmopolitism" of precarious migrants (Agier 2016). But, of course, the analysis of social positions needs to be taken further. It would be interesting, for instance, to know more about the economic condition and differentiated social status, depending on their local or multilocal inscription, of *bichos de obra* and European expatriates. Conversely, we might ask how other-than-local forces structure and transform local social and political space. Or are they merely "elephants in the desert," leaving a void once they have gone?

These are just some of the exciting questions raised by Gustavo Lins Ribeiro's article and I would like to thank him for inviting me to comment on it.

Recebido em 19/07/2023.
Aceito para publicação em 20/07/2023 pela editora Kelly Silva (https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3388-2655).

References

Agier, Michel. 2011. *Antropologia da cidade. Lugares, situações, movimentos*. São Paulo: Terceiro Nome.

Agier, Michel. 2016. *Borderlands. Toward an Anthropology of the Cosmopolitan Condition*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Agier, Michel. 2017. "A Bridge over the Channel. Toward a Situational Anthropology". *Cahiers d'études africaines*, no. 228: 921–3. https://www.cairn-int.info/article-E_CEA_228_0921--a-bridge-over-the-channel.htm

Augé, Marc. 1999. *An Anthropology for Contemporaneous Worlds*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Augé, Marc. 2017. *L'Avenir des terriens. Fin de la préhistoire de l'humanité comme société planétaire*. Paris: Albin Michel.

Bazin, Jean. 1996. "Interpréter ou décrire. Notes critiques sur la connaissance anthropologique". In *Une école pour les sciences sociales*, edited by Jacques Revel and Nathan Wachtel, 401–20. Paris: Cerf/EHESS.

Beck, Ulrich. 2006. *Qu'est-ce que le cosmopolitisme?* Paris: Aubier.

Bensa, Alban. 1996. "De la microhistoire vers une anthropologie critique". In *Jeux d'échelles*, edited by J. Revel, 37–70. Paris: Seuil/Gallimard/EHESS.

Bookchin, Murray. 2018. *Pour un municipalisme libertaire (1990)*. Lyon: Atelier de création libertaire.

Hannerz, Ulf. 1980. *Exploring the city. Inquiries toward an Urban Anthropology*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Hannerz, Ulf. 1991. *Cultural Complexity: Studies in the Social Organization of Meaning*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Jacques, Revel, dir. 1996. *Jeux d'échelles. La micro-analyse à l''expérience*. Paris: Seuil/Gallimard/EHESS.

Lévi-Strauss, Claude. 1950. "Introduction à l'œuvre de Marcel Mauss". In *Sociologie et anthropologie*, Marcel Mauss, IX-LII. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France.

Mauss, Marcel. 1950. *Sociologie et anthropologie*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France.

Pandolfi, Mariella. 2000. "Une souveraineté mouvante et supracoloniale". *Multitudes*, n. 3. https://www.multitudes.net/Une-souverainete-mouvante-et/https://www.multitudes.net/Une-souverainete-mouvante-et/

Ribeiro, Gustavo Lins. 2014. *Outras Globalizações: Cosmopolíticas pós-imperialistas*. Rio de Janeiro: Eduerj.

Schumaker, Lyn. 2001. *Africanizing Anthropology. Fieldwork, Networks, and the Making of Cultural Knowledge in Central Africa*. Durham: Duke University Press.