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Indigenous anthropologies and the issue of positionality

Antropologias indígenas e a questão da posicionalidade

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More than five years ago, when the author began to draft this text, in which I participated as one of her interlocutors, our contact, just started, became a student-advisor relationship for my doctoral research. Back then, we began to discuss the issue of indigenous scholars entering anthropology through its front door as students in graduate programs, seeking a degree and anthropological expertise.

Ramos' main argument is that anthropology can be renewed with the arrival of its intimate others (indigenous peoples) as peers in the construction of knowledge and interpretations pertaining to human and non-human worlds. The author candidly tackles a topic currently in vogue. On the one hand, she expresses her expectations about the shape and substance of the contributions indigenous intellectuals can make to anthropological production. On the other hand, she examines the political dimension the entry of new subjects who, until not long ago, were mere research objects, entails to a disputed field such as anthropology. Both dimensions – indigenous intellectual production and the political importance of their presence in academia – are critical to launch what she calls an *anthropological ecumene*. Although intimately connected, I would venture to say that the latter takes precedence over the former.

To begin with, attempting to define a priori what the future production of indigenous anthropologists will be, in both form and content, risks incurring in the same mistake we so often criticize when anthropological generalizations reify indigenous thinking, frequently reinforcing white people's projections, phobias, and anxieties regarding their Others. Hence, I tend to believe that the debate about the political conditions indigenous people have to fulfil to enter universities in Brazil, specifically in anthropology courses, at present is in itself of great value. I am not simply referring to minimal living conditions (student grants, policies to facilitate their entry and permanence). I am also thinking of the political conditions underlying the constitution of scientific fields with the necessary emphasis on challenges to undo certain fashionable cultural habits among anthropologists and among our peers. The first step, albeit timid, toward an anthropological *ecumene* has already been taken. It involves concrete actions rather than the writing of ethnographies, a plethora of theses, dissertations, and articles. These concrete actions take place in a social field imbedded, like any other social field, in a framework of power relations and privileges. I refer, for example, to the way in which geopolitical and historical forces aggravate the unequal distribution of scarce resources to graduate programs in anthropology, thus exacerbating existing regional inequalities. Moreover, perceptions of Science and the University as sites of "excellence" overrate certain modes of knowledge and writing in detriment to others. As a result, these perceptions favor directly people who have access to good higher education, while decreasing the opportunities for those whose ethnic-racial background forced them to take different social and educational paths.

Ramos had addressed these issues in an assertive and anticipatory way in a 2008 article when she used stage metaphors to talk about indigenous protagonism in writing ethnographies or auto-ethnographies, something she foresees in a not-too-distant future. Her argument hinges upon the debate about the positions of

researcher and researched in the production of anthropological knowledge. What, she asks, will the role of the traditional researcher be if and when the traditional observed, now indigenous university students and faculty write about themselves, as many non-indigenous do? Or when the observed occupy political positions and have their voices heard? That might be the right moment for the traditional ethnographer to withdraw (perhaps working backstage), leaving the stage to indigenous actors themselves.

This is a current and pertinent debate. In her classic work *Decolonizing Methodologies*, Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) mentioned the Maori perception that they had been studied to exhaustion as they see themselves as the most researched people in the world. To be researched can often be flattering when we see the Other's interest in the most trivial aspects of our lives. However, alien scrutiny and curiosity can also be uncomfortable. I remember, for example, in March 2019, when I was in Rio de Janeiro for a seminar entitled *Indigenous Methods* on collaborative methodologies attended by non-indigenous and indigenous researchers from different continents. My delegation participated in a cultural event called "Cultural Astronomy: A Journey through Indigenous Skies." Some indigenous participants did audio-visual recordings of the ceremony for their own media. At a certain point, I noticed that as an indigenous participant took out his professional camera, well-known ethnologist Carlos Fausto immediately picked up his own camera to record the indigenous photographer recording. I wondered: "*is this the right time for me to take a photo of the anthropologist taking a photo of an indigenous person taking a photo?*", "*Who is framing whom?*". This memory also came back to me when a non-indigenous friend, who had recently entered a Master's program in Anthropology, told me she was thinking about her research theme as "research undertaken by indigenous intellectuals". I asked myself: "*even when we are the ones researching, the non-indigenous anthropologists want to research us doing research?*".

I had a similar feeling when Alcida invited me to an interview for her text. As a trained anthropologist, I pondered the situation in structural terms: "*an indigenous person being interviewed by an anthropologist for an analysis.*" Our positions, then, seemed quite clear: researcher and researched. As I got there, I remember, I tried to measure out our positions as follows: "*I want to interview you too soon, professor, for an article I'm working on...*" This initial feeling, though, gave way to something different when we began to consider the possibilities for the dialogue that might emerge between indigenous and non-indigenous anthropologists, culminating in the present exercise.

Alcida's proposal for an ecumenical anthropology, as she has made clear in her texts, is not new, at least as an aspiration. Bringing together distinct forms of knowledge on an equal footing, whether in anthropology or in the broader field of interethnic relations, is a long-standing dream, demanded by peoples devastated by European imperialist expansion. By no means does this diminish the merit of her proposal. All intellectual statements on this theme are welcome, regardless of how one calls them, for they attest to the urgency to reaffirm what still appears utopian or distant, namely, a horizontally diverse anthropological community.

They also show the need to think of anthropological production as a constant play of musical chairs, rather than as a game of *who* researches *whom*, or as ethnographic research ends that never meet.

Nonetheless, to think of anthropology without the researcher/researched positions, or that these positions stop carrying their old stigmatizing meanings, because they are no longer stable, will only be possible, paradoxical as it may seem, if we never lose sight of this dichotomy and the ties of both researcher and researched with the social world at large. In his sociology of intellectuals, Gramsci (1981) had already pointed out, regarding class connections, that both traditional and organic intellectuals had allegiances to their respective social class. What distinguished them was not the fact that they belonged to specific classes, but the place their respective classes occupied within the ideological framework underlying the hegemony that dictated the character of social relations.

This is important, for, in creating an anthropology that is internally diverse, one has to take into account a major hurdle, namely, the idea of separating indigenous from non-indigenous anthropology. For, we may ask, would there be any anthropology, which, one way or the other was not indigenous? In other words, should we not start out with the premise that we are all indigenous to some place in some way? If not through an original connection with a depleted territory ransacked by European colonialism, as in Brazil, then through mental ties with an original Eurocentric matrix, the place from where one speaks. That is, anthropology will not survive a division between a non-reflexive “us” and a composite “them” (indigenous people, LGBTQ+, blacks, maroons, peripheral residents, traditional populations, etc.).

Undoubtedly, the indigenous anthropologists who come to anthropology represent the largest collective group in the discipline – Brazilians; neo-Portuguese; descendants of colonizers¹ – that face up to the challenges of being intellectuals in Brazilian society without losing sight of their own affiliations. At first, I noticed that to the group of indigenous anthropologists who lead an expressive and growing movement within the discipline since 2010, to define positions was part of a needed process of criticism, after decades of experience with anthropologists. Today, as our debate continues, new actors come in, such as the Articulação Brasileira de Indígenas Antropólogos (Brazilian Articulation of Indigenous Anthropologists), ABIA, and new concepts are proposed, such as ecumenical anthropology, the starting point to achieve interethnic communication is to insist that no subject is Universal and that everyone’s position must be taken into account. It is important to discuss the multiple positions within specific societies and the researchers’ social ties, because these features are crucial for us to understand what is being said, how it is said, and why it is being said in this or that study. For instance, we know that experience is central to an ethnography, but the limiting factors for its application have augmented as other subjects are using these tools for distinct purposes. It is not a matter of degree, “who is more or less experienced in a certain ethnographic topic or area”, but rather a question of quality, which varies with the positions and connections of the subjects. The experience of “having been there”

1 In citing these categories, I intend to provoke the readers to think of their own social, class and ethnic affiliations. The use of these categories, and others such as “whites” (Cruz 2002), often causes negative reactions and puzzlement, since they apparently simplify or stigmatize the complexity of subjects who do not think appropriate to have *their* trajectories translated into generalist and opaque ethnic-racial categories. However, naming and classifying are incontestable acts of power and, beyond their specific connotations, here I want to emphasize the naming operation in itself. On this point, the Quilombola intellectual Nêgo Bispo is categorical: “When colonialists call them ‘Indians,’ they are using an empty word, a lifeless word. All words of the originary peoples have life, they are alive. For this reason, the colonialists attribute an empty word as an attempt to weaken. [...] To attribute this name, the colonialists developed ideas. And so do we. [...] I am attributing names. If one of colonialists’ weapons is to name us, then we shall name them too. And we shall give names that weaken them. If they say: ‘I don’t like you calling me that,’ we reply: ‘Fine, but don’t call me that either.’ If the colonialist calls me black, I’ll call him white. If he calls me brown, I’ll call him yellow” (Bispo 2018, 25–6).

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is one thing; that of “being from there/belong to that group” is another.

With this positional challenge updated and reset, there is no room, I believe, for fear that the ethnographic enterprise will become self-centred, or that the discipline will shrink to produce auto-ethnographies. My experience as a Tuxá anthropologist indicates that, whatever the indigenous purpose of their journey through the discipline may be, it sets out from the quest for dialogue, exchange and listening, but also a return and never a monologue. If anthropologists are right and ethnocentrism remains a universal characteristic, the specific nature of anthropology is not the act of speaking about Others, but the observation that we need many Others for us to see ourselves more clearly. As Saramago said, “you have to leave the island in order to see the island.”

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