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Byung-Chul Han and the anthropology of power: reflexive contributions

Byung-Chul Han e a antropologia do poder: aportes reflexivos

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Fernando José Ciello

Universidade Federal de Roraima, Instituto de Antropologia, Programa de Pós-graduação em Antropologia Social (PPGANTS/UFRR). Boa Vista, Roraima - RR, Brasil

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8463-6150>

This essay engages in a discussion on concepts of power, contrasting the works of the South Korean philosopher Byung-Chul Han with discussions on the subject within the scope of anthropology. Within the limits of this essay, the text provides a minimal review of anthropological traditions of studies on power, followed by a presentation of themes that are exposed in Han's work, especially related to how the author conceptualizes power. While the philosopher proposes the pursuit of a mobile concept, whose appearance could be modified depending on the movement of its constituent aspects; in anthropology, studies on power are centrally linked to the development of ethnography and the study of precise empirical contexts, with no unequivocal concept of power ever being constituted. Despite seemingly irreconcilable differences, this essay suggests that Han's work can be incorporated into anthropological readings by the possibility of revising the places attributed to power in our research and by its potential contribution to studies dedicated to issues associated with contemporary anthropologies and critical events situated in these times.

Power. Byung-Chul Han. Ethnography. Anthropology of Power. Contemporary Anthropology.

O presente ensaio ocupa-se de uma discussão sobre conceitos de poder, contrastando trabalhos do filósofo sul-coreano Byung-Chul Han com discussões sobre a temática no âmbito da antropologia. Dentro dos limites deste artigo, o texto oferece uma revisão mínima das tradições antropológicas de estudo do poder e, em sequência, uma apresentação de temas que são explorados na obra de Han, especialmente relacionados ao modo como o autor conceitua o poder. Enquanto o filósofo propõe a busca de um conceito móvel, cuja aparência pudesse ser modificada dependendo do movimento de seus aspectos constituintes; em antropologia, estudos em torno do poder associam-se centralmente ao desenvolvimento da etnografia e do estudo de contextos empíricos precisos, nunca tendo constituído um conceito inequívoco de poder. Apesar das diferenças aparentemente irreconciliáveis, busca-se sugerir que o trabalho de Han possa ser incorporado às leituras da antropologia pela possibilidade de rever os lugares atribuídos ao poder em nossas pesquisas, e por sua contribuição potencial aos estudos que se dedicam a questões associadas com as antropologias do contemporâneo e aos eventos críticos que se situam nestes tempos.

Poder. Byung-Chul-Han. Etnografia. Antropologia do Poder. Antropologia do contemporâneo.



Introduction

Byung-Chul Han, a South Korean philosopher based in Germany, recently released a provocative commentary on the concept of power (2019). In his book, the author suggests the search for a mobile concept, capable of unifying different representations¹. A “theoretical chaos” (2019, 7), according to Han, would still prevail, demanding the creation of a “fundamental form of power that, through the displacement of internal elements” would be capable of generating “different forms of appearance” (2019, 8). This appeal for a broader concept also flirts with a costly problem for anthropology at the same time, the one of reducing different forms to a set of absolute rules of operation. However, the author’s works have addressed central contemporary issues and produced interesting interpretations about life in relation to dictates of information, motivation and positivity; about violence; communication; melancholy; neoliberal productivities; depression and other diagnoses of our time; among other topics (Han 2017, 2018, 2022).

Throughout this essay, I aim to discuss the agreements and disagreements between anthropology and Byung-Chul Han regarding power. I argue that Han contributes to an ethnography of the different constellations of power in contemporary societies through the inventory of images we share about power and the attention to the arrangements and agents that make up these relational universes, making, in his own way, a relevant contribution to the writing of ethnographic theories, especially in contexts where escape, multiplicity, and dissidence are part of the experience of anthropological research.

The essay begins with a discussion of the ways in which power appears in anthropological theories. Then, it critically presents some points from Byung-Chul Han’s work on power, especially based on some of his recent works (Han 2019, 2018). In the final sections, in search of a more incisive presentation of the possible collaborations between the perspectives involved, I bring different authors and discussions back to defend the search for a more comprehensive perspective of the contributions of anthropology on the events of power and, simultaneously, more concerned with the different relational constellations in which the issue of power emerges, beyond ethnographic particularization.

Anthropology, power and difference

Discussions about power in anthropology are not limited to a specific field, but the first half of the 20th century is usually considered a landmark due to the development of what is conventionally called “political anthropology”. Currently, theories do not only aim to distance themselves from evolutionary interpretations, but also to assert themselves based on a new paradigm, on field research and on notions of structure and function.

First of all, the distinction made by Henry Maine (1986) between societies whose social organization was based on status and those based on contract had, for a long time, made so-called “primitive societies” the main theme of anthro-

1 “For some, it means repression; for others, it is a constructive element in communication. Legal, political and sociological notions of power remain unreconciled. Power is sometimes associated with freedom, sometimes with coercion. For some power is based on common action, for others on struggle. Some draw a sharp line between power and violence. For others, violence is just a more extreme form of power. At one moment power is associated with the law, at another with arbitrariness.” (Han 2019, 8).



pology. The presumption of the absence of politics and the State in these societies was due to the difference between the state legal model and the contractual model. However, when segmental lineages and relationships involving exchange, reciprocity and kinship were identified in the first half of the 20th century, resulting from the work of structural-functionalist anthropology in Africa in the 1940s, the binding models that were characteristic of the State also began to be associated to the so-called “primitive societies” (Lima and Goldman 2003)².

Secondly, since the 19th century, ideas of subordination, social determination and coercion were present in different theoretical constructs about social organization³. As theories raised questions related to social cohesion or interaction, they also implicitly raised the problem of defining society, which, according to Rapport and Overing (2000), implied a double definition: societies as structures of separation and opposition or as ways of institutionally elaborating relations of domination and subordination.

Therefore, on the one hand, there was the problem of how close a given society was, more or less, to a model based on structures of domination, separation, opposition, subordination — models of organization that essentially mimicked the Western state apparatus, based on hierarchical organization and legislation (Kuper, 2008). On the other hand, there was the development of empirical research as a tool to describe the political institutions of other societies. However, even in the context of British functionalism, political institutions represented universals of human social experience, which perpetuated the retention of Western categories as references, especially for the definition of what could be considered as society (Rapport and Overing 2000, 336).

The question of power did not immediately become a topic for anthropology, whose conceptualization was subsumed into themes related to social structure and organization. The emphasis on empirical research enhanced the descriptions of other models, but did not thematize the implicit concept of power. These initial comments show that agreements and disagreements about power are not new in anthropology. Anthropological theories related to power were developed more specifically throughout the 20th century and I would like to continue talking about them in the next sections.

From the State to its limits

In the first half of the 20th century, ideas associated with power were still strongly related to the notion of State. The perception that kinship was prioritized in so-called “primitive societies” in opposition to the place occupied by economics and politics in our own social order imposed the problem of comparing the State in Western societies to the State (or the lack of it) in societies primitives (Rapport and Overing 2000, 336). From functionalism, however, the possibility of exploring the theme of political institutions, even in societies where questions were raised about the State, presented a new field of analytical possibilities to anthropology.

Evans-Pritchard’s work is representative of this period (2008). When dedicat-

2 This is a more complex and comprehensive issue. See Kuper (2008), Goldman (1999), Lima and Goldman (2003), Kuschner (2007), Sá (2015).

3 Simmel (1983), for example, highlights the place of subordination to a higher power (of an idea, of a group, of a person) as a basic form to establish interactions and reciprocity. Durkheim himself (1996, 2007) builds around the idea of coercion a whole set of developments on social cohesion. Apart from the necessary nuances and contextualization, I highlight the existence of an imaginary about the political event and about the power that has been in motion for a long time in social theories before the emergence of political anthropology as a specialization.



ing himself to understanding the Nuer institutions and their political system, the author begins by describing the scheme of the tribes' segments and the way in which, at first, they do not denote a structure or political coherence equivalent to the State. His work does not necessarily talk about political power, but about different relational arrangements that lead to the performance of social and political organizational functions. A political group is only constituted as such, among the Nuer, in particular situations, when a type of organization that generates such identification is required. Although each group has several segments, they tend to unite in opposition to other groupings, making fusion and segmentation constant forms of what Evans-Pritchard calls the Nuer political structure.

The constitution of a group, which is circumstantial, is not qualified as a permanent identity and, at the same time, a segment can be related to others, for other or the same purposes, and can generate different transitory identifications. Evans-Pritchard also noted that chieftaincy among the Nuer did not correspond to a formal figure or leadership with defined spheres and powers. On the contrary, a "prominent social personality" (Evans-Pritchard 2008, 190), associated with the role of a leader, would achieve this position through a variety of personal aptitudes and social dispositions, which would allow the person to exert an influence on a group of kindred subjects, but not in the community or in the group in a more extensive way.

Edmund Leach (2014), also considered a central reading for anthropological discussions in this field, does not develop an unequivocal concept about power either, stating that power is an attribute of "people with positions". Despite almost offering a possibility of conceptualization, Leach disagrees that the desires or needs that guide social actions aimed at obtaining power can be so quickly associated with particular and unambiguous ends (2014, 78). When expressing the connection between power and "people with positions", Leach is not talking about political power as we understand it, but about the development of the "social person", recognition and the search for "appreciation" from fellow group members. In short, therefore, power does not appear as a concept tied to particular institutions, but to the performance of social relations, through which acquiring power can make a significant difference.

The author is concerned with demonstrating that the models imagined by anthropology at the time presupposed balance and used the concept of social structure (Radcliffe-Brown 2013) as a resource to emphasize the stability of social groups. Leach (2014) concludes that it is important to contrast the social structures imagined by anthropologists with real societies, which, contrary to what static models presuppose, are structured in correlation with the environment and its transformations. A real society, he says, is "a process in time" (2014, 69). Anthropology would be responsible for studying ideas about the distribution of power between groups and people that lead to the construction of social structures in practical situations (2014, 68). The works of Evans-Pritchard, Leach, and others from the period are in line with accentuating the political aspect of other models of relationships and make a central contribution to the development of the field



of political anthropology (Kuschnir 2007).

Detaching itself from British functionalism, anthropology's confrontation with its own role in colonial domination impacted the way of engaging with power in anthropology from the second half of the 20th century onwards (Niezen 2018). Moving beyond the problem of the association between power and the State, and also from the idea of power as an attribute of specific actors or people in authority, the focus shifted to broader and more contradictory territories of power. Studies then began to privilege the ways in which subalternity and vulnerability could emerge within power relations, in capitalism, in international policies and enterprises (Niezen 2018, 2); consistent with other discussions about the role of political anthropology in revealing a world system and producing ethnographies of capitalism (Caldeira 1989, Ribeiro and Feldman-Bianco 2003). There was also a dispersion of theoretical problems and research themes from the 1950s on, as Kuschnir (2007) states, motivated by facing new issues, realizing the impact of feminism and post-colonial discussions on reflections on power (Kuschnir 2007, Maluf 2013).

Michel Foucault's vast work and the emergence of an "ethnography of institutions" (Niezen 2018) correspond to two important forms of engagement with power in the second half of the 20th century, with great impact on anthropology as a whole. In the first case, it represented a decentering of power in relation to the State and seeking to interpret, from a historical-critical perspective, the formation of discourses and technologies that act indirectly as forms of domination. In the second, it sought greater specificity, mainly from ethnography, to describe the effects and practices of power in organizations. These two movements are crucial to follow the development of political anthropology since the 1950s. Concepts such as power relations, hegemony, domination, ideology, cultural capital, among many others, played an important role from that period onwards as institutions began to be interpreted by their ability to engender forms of domination and violence in broader configurations of power (Niezen 2018, 5).

The works of Pierre Clastres (2003), whose seminal elaboration on the so-called "societies against the State" had a great impact on the field of political anthropology, also deserve highlighting. In his discussion on the role of leadership among indigenous societies, mainly in South America, the author highlights that leadership does not occur through the effective exercise of coercive power, except for extraordinary situations, but rather, mostly through the production of a peace-maker, moderator, generous and communicative function in correlation with a role of mediation and not of command or decision over others. The author reflects on the strangeness of a leadership that exercises an authority "without power" or the persistence of an "impotent power" (Clastres 2003, 47). Pierre Clastres' accomplishment was centering political anthropology on power, articulating it mainly around the different ways of constituting politics in different human societies and not on ideal types (Lima and Goldman 2003, 15).

Near the end of the century, other questions arise regarding the production of authority and power based on anthropological writing and the limitations of



the concept of culture. The problem, says Strathern (2013), is technical in nature: “how to create an awareness of different social worlds when all at one’s disposal is terms which belong to one’s own” (2013, 43). The translation of a world conceived as another involves an effort to make that existence an adaptation capable of being understood within a conceptual universe that can harbor it, somehow creating this universe (*Id.*, *ibid.*). The deep awareness of the problem of ethnographic representation in the last decades of the 20th century (Clifford 1986, Caldeira 1988), transformed the interpretations on the issue of power in anthropology even more profoundly, which followed a path that started from a troubled relationship with the State about the study of its limits throughout the century.

Ethnography and the (non-)places of power

The strengthening of ethnography and field research as instruments of anthropological practice marked an important transformation for anthropological theories of the 20th century (Guber 2001) and ethnography is a central node in discussions involving power in this same period. At the turn of the century, ethnography corresponded to the great invention of British functionalists, announcing a new type of anthropological text, a new way of translating the other (Strathern 2013). In the context of the so-called “crisis of representation” and criticisms about the author, ethnography is once again the center of the discussion, its forms of authority, its literary, political and artistic nature (Clifford 2002). Concomitantly, the development of so-called “theories of practice” and new syntheses regarding the relationship between the individual and society boosted the development of feminist critiques, posing a new set of questions involving structures of domination and also the dimension of social action/agency (Ortner 2006, 2011). The agency, for example, would never leave the anthropological agenda in the years that followed, promoting other reflections at different intersections (Mahmood 2019, Despret 2013, among others).

The adoption by anthropology of a set of more comprehensive theoretical discussions⁴ that were not necessarily born in the anthropological field was also due to the emphasis on the role of ethnography in describing new agents, movements and social processes. In short, the different movements that follow the development of anthropological theories in the 20th century cannot be separated from the strengthening of ethnography as a practice linked to anthropological practice. In these different movements, the issue of power never ceased to be present in one way or another. As Palmeira and Goldman (1996) suggested in their reading of Kuper’s (2008) work, power ends up having a central place in the development of social anthropology.

On this account, it is possible to address a special place that power occupies in anthropology, to address its “oblique, indirect, hidden” nature (Niezen 2018). In anthropology, power

(...) would not be a given thing, it would not be a substantive reality for

4 See Maluf (2013), on the impact of feminist, post-colonial critiques, philosophies of difference, among others.



which corresponding theoretical thoughts are offered, presupposing an appeal to a referential conception of truth. (...) when we talk about power, in the sense in which this notion gained operational value, implicit or explicit, in anthropological thought, we do not claim an object about which the “tradition” of the discipline in a univocal and linear way came to offer, cumulatively, greater intelligibility (Sá 2015, 87).

Even so, the predominant image of power in anthropology at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century is still concerned with thematizing politics, the State, the economy, religion, deriving from Western models of sociality (Rapport and Overing 2000, 335). Similarly, despite having been led to understand other configurations of power from the second half of the 20th century, anthropological studies on power and politics would still emphasize domination as a privileged way of practicing power. It is worth remembering the criticism by Marshal Sahlins (2004), for whom there would be “a hyper-inflation of significance”, a “Foucaultian-Gramscian-Nietzschean Philosophy obsession with power”, the incarnation of the “incurable functionalism of anthropology” (Sahlins 2004, 27). Derivations such as hegemony, resistance, counter-hegemony, violence, colonization, domination, among others, instead of being deepened by anthropology, would have been trivialized by their subsumption to power, emptying them of their references (Sahlins 2004).

A striking feature of anthropology is, as it is sometimes said, taking subjects seriously. This emphasis, especially in the field of political anthropology, can be elaborated based on the idea of “ethnographic theory”, proposed by Goldman (2006). According to the author, ethnographic theory would propose trying to solve the problem of the environment that is formed in anthropology, when we see native theories on one side and scientific theories on the other. Its central objective would be “the elaboration of models of understanding of any social object that, even when produced in and for a particular context, (...) [could] function as a matrix of intelligibility in and for other contexts” (Goldman 2006, 170–1).

The idea of ethnographic theory is important because it is not centered on generalist conceptualizations, but rather on the ways in which such relationships emerge in precise empirical contexts, comparing different concepts without falling into extreme particularization or scientific objectification. The movement, says Goldman (2006, 28), would follow the fashion of wild thought, collecting concrete elements and combining them in more abstract analyzes capable of explaining other forms of human thought in yet other contexts.

In his commentary on the relations between anthropology and ethnography, Ingold (2017) suggests that anthropology has the possibility of philosophizing in the world, in conversation with its multiple and diverse inhabitants. Anthropology’s connection with the world, its speculative character is what characterizes it, more than ethnography itself, with its own history and whose objectives are not limited to anthropology as a form of theoretical generalization. Ingold (2017) problematizes the correspondence between anthropology and ethnography, defending



the former as a form of comparative and sensitive exploration of the world, but not as an explanation or a successive stage to the “field”.

Therefore, the analysis of power relations in particular contexts is consistent with the developments of theories throughout the 20th century, especially with the use of ethnography. The perception that power is best located in precise contexts, strengthened by the significant dispersion of research and themes since the second half of the 20th century, would also imply, however, a decrease in anthropology’s capacity to make comparative generalizations, in contrast with the idea that doing anthropology is doing ethnography and then describing it in an integrated way (Ingold 2017, 333).

It is clear that power constitutes a central issue in anthropology. What I want to suggest then, going through Byung-Chul Han’s contributions, is the possibility of looking at power, what is known about it, what is said about it, of recognizing some commonplaces, including trying to deepen the critique about what we do with power in our research. If power is not a thing in itself, but, even so, as it has been understood for a long time, it also does not stop “doing things”, then it is not absurd to try to imagine some place “in the middle”, between the excessive particularization of the contexts in which power serves as a way of describing relationships of different orders, on the one hand, and the theoretical elaborations that we can make about it, on the other.

On this account, the argument is that the current anthropological practice is itself an experience that crosses different issues, but we often arrive in the field with a presumptive idea of power relations⁵. This is not a new observation and, even if the anthropological enterprise might have always addressed this, maybe it is worth starting to reimagine the ways in which we work with different categories. Different voices, inside and outside anthropology, have engaged in the interpretation of events marked by incongruity, instability, fragmentation, which is consistent with contemporary movements. Attention has been drawn to the need to produce new sciences of complexity (Cesarino 2022), considering the changing world and issues that we can no longer fail to notice in our research.

Different authors (Maluf 2013, 2015; Cesarino 2021, 2022; Ingold 2015; Stengers 2015; Segata and Rifiotis 2021; Dardot and Laval 2016) have worked to demonstrate how a new state of affairs appears to exist with institutions that could previously be understood as stable; about the problem of dealing with themes in which events often escape established models; about new subjects, movements and social practices, among other issues. For the purposes of this essay, what is envisioned is the possibility that, even with significant differences in relation to anthropological paradigms, by suggesting new perspectives on the arrangements that involve power, Byung-Chul Han can join the efforts of these contemporary anthropologies.

Byung-Chul Han and power: relation and mediation

One move that Han makes is to challenge the idea that power emerges from the imposition of obedience, opposing a model of power as a form of coercion.

5 As this is an essay focused on theoretical discussion, I do not present discussions of my own fieldwork here. The initial motivation for this review, however, lies precisely in the research of a particular social context (Ciello 2013, Ciello 2019) in which ideas of power are not only presented as scientific theories, but as formulations in the field of mental health, psychiatry, by the professionals with whom I researched and by social movements.



The author indicates that power is usually understood as a mere causal relationship between ego and alter, in which the ego is capable of generating certain behavior in the alter against its will. In this model, the alter suffers from the will of the ego, and this will is not only strange to it, but also imposed. The freedom of the alter, understood in the context of the relationship with this powerful other, would thus be limited by the power of the ego (Han 2019, 9).

According to Han, it is characteristic of the event of power that the ego provokes desire and will in the alter; that the ego remains present in the alter own perception. In this sense, the logic of power relations would not have to do with the imposition of obedience nor with the pre-reflective neutralization of the subordinate's will. The event of power would thus be involved in relations of mediation, dependence, interdependence, participation, reciprocity, influence, adaptation, persuasion, among many others.

The logic according to which power would emanate either from above or below, hierarchically, would produce a non-dialectical model (Han 2019, 15–6), resulting from too much attention to power as a form of oppression and not as a creative form. It is necessary to consider, according to the author, “the multiple dialectics of power” and the different “political constellations”, given that a powerful person will create strategies to maintain themselves or maintain their power project for the subordinates, increasing the number of people who somehow participate in that project (Han 2019, 16).

However, Han's argument is not only about the non-equivalence between power and coercion, which seems well established in anthropology, but also that power is a “phenomenon of form” (2019, 11), as it depends on how an action is motivated. Assuming the problem of representation that the ego imposes itself on the alter, the question would be about what kind of appearance the relation takes on. When speaking of the logic of power as a logic that projects beyond the desire for domination and force over others, Han (2019) suggests that power would not produce a force or a mechanical blow, but a space and a domain of movements and relations.

The existence of a greater power would be accompanied by a “yes” of “free will” and not by the “no” or “I must” by the subordinates. This power capable of remaining in the alter in a non-coercive way is understood by Han as a power more capable of mediation than that of the model purely based on coercion. Power, thus, would reflect the ability to make the ego's desire flow in a direction imagined there and do what the alter also desires. Power, in this sense, would not exclude freedom, nor could it be considered its opposite, but would promote a relation with it: freedom would appear as a way of guaranteeing the impression of the absence of power and, at the same time, the tacit acceptance surrounded by the free will of the alter. Therefore, freedom is an effect of a certain form that power relations take. Freedom and power, then, could perfectly be arranged in power relations, thus configuring them as an event essentially linked to what is called “mediation”.

The appearance of the relationship between an ego and an alter was an issue



also debated by Eric Wolf (Feldman-Bianco and Ribeiro 2003). According to the author (*Id.*), there are four essential forms of power and the ability of an ego to impose its will on an alter would be one of them, which would allow drawing attention to the “sequences of interactions and transactions between people” (2003, 326). The other modes of power would be power as an attribute of the person – personal capacity or potency; power as a controller of scenarios and places where interactions occur and; finally, power as an organizer of the scenarios themselves and the distribution and flow of energy within a power structure. According to Wolf (Feldman-Bianco and Ribeiro 2003), therefore, there is an escalation of power practices through which the four levels can be considered, starting with the subject and moving towards more comprehensive structures.

Comparatively, in Han’s works, the modes of power are articulated around five dimensions: its logic, its semantics, its metaphysics, its politics and its ethics. While according to Wolf (Feldman-Bianco, Ribeiro 2003) the four dimensions could be evaluated in isolation, as distinct moments or as distinct emphases in different processes, to Han (2019), there is no clarity about what these dimensions mean, leaving a remaining doubt whether, in fact, what is sought is a “new”, unified concept of power or whether, in fact, the author is drawing attention to the traps of our own representations of it.

Han’s position on mediation is important in two other ways. Firstly, it aligns with the idea that the relation is a central point, that is, how the different processes that place agents in relation occur, opening up the possibility of extrapolating the dimension of coercion or domination. Secondly, the author also resumes the problem that, to some extent, subjects are aware of the social processes in which they take part, in the sense that there is participation in projects of power and that the relations that appear there (if resistance or not) result from the specific arrangement and positions that such subjects occupy.

Absence

According to Han, the common formula of power, therefore, does not do justice to its complexity, given that the appearance of resistance or opposition would precisely denote the weakness of power. The ideas of resistance and dispute, we can infer, cannot be read only as forms of opposition to an established power, but in the dimensions of mediation and agency existing between these places. For him, “the more powerful the power, the more silently it will act. Where it needs to show itself, it is because it is already weakened” (2019, 9–10). In this sense, a second issue in the debate on the logic of power refers to its ability to not be apparent, according to its capacity for mediation. Power, Han asserts, “shines through absence” (2019, 92).

Once it is not pure violence, as power occurs in processes of mediation and violence lacks this capacity, power can only maintain itself as such to the extent that it creates or inhabits horizons of meaning that guide action. Therefore, together with logic, power is also endowed with semantics. The occurrence of meaning



can only exist within networks of relationships that cross and go beyond the fact as such (Han 2019, 52). Meaning, thus, is taken by the author as a relational phenomenon and also the place where the necessary mediation for power relations is based. On this account, power is seen as a relationship and not as something that can be possessed.

The rules, dispositions and customs of a people, however coercive they may be, are experienced as freedom and, therefore, have a greater capacity to produce meaning with the perpetuation of the logic of power. The continuity of this meaning is linked to the “being-there” (*dasein*) of which Heidegger speaks and which serves as the meaning internalized by the formulation of a “we” that is unconscious of power, but which perpetuates itself as normality, everyday life, consciousness, nature (Han 2019, 88–9). According to Han, it is the automation of this habit that increases the effectiveness of power, as it appears under the rubric of this natural and everyday “we” (Han 2019, 91).

A crucial author to the discussions by Byung-Chul Han (2018, 2019) is Michel Foucault. The technologies of power (Foucault 1987) could be described based on their semantic effects: the power of sovereignty would be a power poor in mediation but that, nevertheless, produces a symbology related to the sword, blood, revenge and struggle, central signs through which power would communicate (Han 2019, 69–70). The power of civil legislation, on the other hand, would not have control over the sword and struggle, but rather over the penalty that produces the law. Having a greater capacity for mediation, the power to make laws would also be the power to control ideas. It remains as such due to its potential to circulate a system of signifiers, which is respected, morally incorporated (Han 2019, 72–3). In contrast, the power of discipline would ultimately penetrate “deeply into the subject [in the form of] (...) wounds and representations” (Han 2019, 74). Neither on the sword nor the law, disciplinary power would be based on another language, that of habit, combined with the creation of trained and obedient bodies, and selling itself as normality, everydayness and triviality (Han 2019, 74–5).

It is worth taking some time on the associations between Foucault and Han. Firstly, the question of power, in Michel Foucault’s work, is not raised by the need for a concept, but by the problems raised by what the author considered the central objective of his work, that of “creating a history of the different ways in which, in our culture, human beings have become subjects” (Foucault 1995, 231). To study such modes, a model that did not only think about ways of legitimizing power in legal models would be needed, but that was also capable of expanding these definitions (*Ibid.*, 232). Instead of an analysis focused on the general rationalization of power relations in our society and our culture, the proposal would then be to analyze this rationality in specific fields, as well-situated processes. A starting point for this new analysis, more concerned with the relation between theory and practice, would be to begin from the “forms of resistance against different forms of power”, not only analyzing power from its internal rationality, but from the “antagonism of strategies” in power relations (*Ibid.*, 234).

In the development of this idea, Foucault seems to indicate that what is at issue



is not resistance in itself as an intrinsic operation of power, but that especially in the modern State, struggles such as those opposing men and women, medicine and population, among others, implied forms of resistance that could be a starting point to understand power relations. In *Subject and Power* (1995 [1982]), Foucault distinguishes three types of struggles: against forms of domination; against forms of exploitation; against forms of subjection. Previously, however, in the *History of Sexuality* (2015), the idea of struggle is not used by the author, when he described power as “a complex strategic situation in a given society” (p. 101).

Castro (2016) suggests that the question about power, in Foucault’s work, has political motivations, mainly related to the phenomena of modernity: “the centralized State, bureaucracy, concentration camps, health policies” (2016, 323). The political forms of modernity promoted a “complex combination of individualization techniques and totalization procedures” (Foucault *apud* Castro 2016, 323) that were thematized by Foucault as a reaction to his time. Therefore, Foucault’s perception on power did not arise from a need to evaluate the concept in the sense of systematizing aspects that would be inherent to it, but rather to rationalize about its different mechanisms and modes of functioning, analyzing specific rationalities that emerged in a certain period of time.

Han agrees that Foucault aims to move away from power as a negative form, only meant to “exclude, oppress, expel, censor, abstract, mask, dissimulate” (Han 2019, 63). But, in his opinion, Foucault would have privileged the dimension of resistance by orienting his analysis towards practices of coercion and the presence of a “paradigm of struggle” in the processes he observed (Han 2019, 65). The existence of struggle or resistance, on the other hand, is not a criterion, in Han’s work, to recognize power relations (2019, 182).

These distinctions between the two authors reflect more the different places from which they speak than a methodological problem. It is the new conditions of life in neoliberalism that are imposed in Han’s work. In another of his works, the need for such a discussion is explicit (Han 2018). It is due to the fact that, in neoliberalism, we come to believe that we are free and unsubmissive projects, not so many subjects of (substantiated) power but capable of power (Han 2018, 10). What the author suggests is that within the scope of neoliberalism the subject becomes capable, a participant in the dominant project, longing for personal reinvention, for self-enterprise, as they experience freedom as a way of being able to do so. What is at stake here, therefore, is no longer a relationship of explicit exploitation mediated by resistance from the “subaltern”, but their tacit acceptance to participate in the power project⁶.

While in the disciplinary regime the body is the object of a biopolitical regime (Foucault 1999, 2008, 2015, 2019; Deleuze, 1992); in neoliberalism, the “soul” becomes the object, transforming it into a now psychopolitical regime (HAN 2018, 30; 40). The imperatives that govern the way of existing in this world are positive stimuli, emotions, mental optimization, self-commitment to exhaustion, initiative, motivation, self-help techniques, psychotherapeutic treatments, among others⁷ In neoliberalism, therefore, the dimension of struggles and resistance, in the sense

6 Butler (2017) has important contributions on this topic. For the author, the ambivalence of power as a form of production and subordination is a theme that has been little explored. She investigates what makes it possible for, simultaneously, subordination to enable the emergence of the subject and the conditions for the possibility of action. Like Han, the author problematizes the emphasis on power as a force that imposes itself and puts pressure on subjects.

7 According to Dardot and Laval (2016), neoliberalism made a business society possible through the extension of desires for maximum productivity and self-enterprise in the subjects themselves, based on a new subjective norm (Dardot and Laval 2016, 321).



given to it by Foucault (1995), would be less and less present, even in these large blocks of oppositions, as the psychopolitical device would imply a new subjective “programming”.

In any case, from the point of view of the anthropology of politics and power, which draws heavily on Foucault’s work, the two perspectives do not seem mutually exclusive. In his own way, Han sees in the reflection on forms of power a possibility of rationalizing new contemporary problems and controversies, of which there is certainly no shortage of examples: the global pandemic, the climate crisis and the Anthropocene, the shift to the extreme right in a myriad of governments around the world, the reappearance of fascism, among others. The dimension that Foucault highlights is, as he himself says, that power designates a “set of actions that induce and respond to each other” (Foucault 1995, 240). In the reading offered here, both authors thus provoke a reflection of interest for anthropology, as they call into question the multiple forms, operations, positions that are arranged in power relations.

Continuity of power

As we have seen, for Han, a power that must show itself as such does not effectively have the capacity for mediation, as it is not capable of continuing in the other. A full power, on the contrary, would be one capable of self-understanding, of shining through absence. Capitalist society could never have sustained itself if it had only been supported by repression (Machado 2019, 19): what allows structures of power to perpetuate or transform themselves, to continue in people’s individual projects? How can we investigate these different ways of relating to power events? Unlike the lack of agency, according to Han, power would allow one to go beyond oneself: the desire for power would be based on the re-encounter of oneself in the other, that is, on the re-encounter not only of the ego’s projects and intentions, but of the self itself, in the alter, replacing, so to speak, a dimension of the place of alterity in relations of power.

Power, under this perspective, is a fundamental characteristic of the experience of being human and a politics of otherness, so to speak. Never being part of discrepant ontological entities, ego and alter are related in the event of action, there are possibilities of agency that are pronounced in both directions. According to Han, it is necessary to view the alter as an “individual capable of making decisions and acting actively” (Han 2019, 100), paying attention to the multiple ways in which alter and ego are integrated and, also, to the ways in which the alter also experiences freedom and participates in projects of power. A consequent attention is possible here, precisely to resituate freedom, power and democracy, values that make up our constellations of power beyond those capitalist and liberal references to which they are tied.

Han deepens the sense of the continuity of the self in the other to a subjective space: the other is not necessarily dominated, but internalized, assimilated. Subjective here would not necessarily refer to an opposition between object and sub-



ject, but, precisely, to a conceptual isomorphy between them: subject and object are reconciled in internalization (Han 2019, 114). On this account, power would have as one of its essential dynamics the “digestion” of the other, the transformation of the strange and negative exterior into identity and interiority (Han 2019, 102–3). The greatest power of being would be its greatest capacity to generate negativity, to carry the “non-being”, to transform it into “becoming” (Han 2019, 106–7).

Therefore, at least three aspects seem to be central to this discussion: a) power allows the possession of a representation and of one’s own image of the world and of the other, thus an image that is not that of the other, but that emerged from a fold of otherness. Power would not be something externally desired to the human being, but the very condition through which the “soul” and human identity become possible (Han 2019, 119); b) “the will to power is (...) always a will to oneself” (Han 2019, 106) and; c) “Power is a phenomenon of interiority and subjectivity”/ “Subjectivity is constitutive of power” (Han 2019, 108).

Final considerations

In the first part of this essay, I tried to develop the idea that, in anthropology, discussions addressing power are closely related to ethnography. The emergence of political anthropology coincided with the development of fieldwork as a professional trait of the anthropologist’s work and it was also in this context that the question of power began to be posed in a more specific way by anthropology even though it has never been detached from anthropological practice. The developments that came with Michel Foucault’s work in general and the impact of discussions on colonialism and feminist theories, specifically, consolidated a certain anthropological inclination for the study of power from precise empirical contexts and not as a form of fundamental rationality.

A difference that I considered important to highlight throughout the essay is that while in Byung-Chul Han’s work there is a call for the development of a more mobile concept of power, which could have its appearance modified in response to combinations of different constituent aspects; in anthropology, throughout the history of the field, a specific concept of power was not established. On the contrary, in anthropology, following important disciplinary transformations that happened throughout the second half of the 20th century, the central category is that of power relations and the questioning around the institutions and places in which power appears. This difference would seem irreconcilable.

What I want to suggest in this last section is that even though we did not invest in the definition of specific concepts, anthropological practice did not fail to shape a set of preconceptions about power. Han’s (2019) perspective resonates with what we have seen, that power is not limited to a single model of relationship in which domination or oppression are taken as nullifying of the agency and desire of subordinates. However, even in anthropology, the permanence of legal logic, hierarchy and subordination was perpetuated in the way power was sought to be understood. Therefore, power seems to always be intertwined in different



relations, but it is not effectively questioned why power appears in either native or scientific discourses as a given category. On the one hand, and thus a priori, power is not taken as a phenomenon separate from social practices, but as a practice integrated into an analysis of power relations. At the same time, on the other hand, anthropology did not only invest in defining power, but also presumed it within distinct social institutions.

On this account, despite not constituting a stable figure in the conceptual framework of anthropology, it is important to realize that when talking about different configurations of power, the category itself is still substantiated, equated with an ontological condition. In this sense, we learn to talk about political power, popular power, power relations, the power of institutions, among others. Power, even if relativized, would somehow seem to exist pre-objectively and would only be re-elaborated, reconfigured in culture. Beyond the critique of theories, what seems important to remember is that power does not exist only as a category of analysis or conceptual expression of particular contexts, but that, when doing anthropology, we also circulate concepts of power that, in retrospect, can also limit our understanding about whatever relationships it would allow (or not) to describe. Therefore, we can partially agree with Sahlins' (2004) criticism that power has been trivialized in anthropology.

At the same time, however, the context in which Sahlins (2004), who wrote these impressions for a conference held in 1993, was positioned refers to post-modernism in anthropology in a more immediate way. Since that moment, many issues have already been rethought, and one of the merits of postmodernism may have been precisely to highlight power, instigating discussions about agency, representation, social action, ethnographic authority, among others. Likewise, the importance of feminist and decolonial critiques, well established in anthropology, resided in the resumption of power as a central topic for understanding social life, and in the perception of these impacts on the multiplication of themes in anthropology (Kuschnir 2007, Vincent 2002, Niezen 2018). Power does not leave the agenda of anthropology because the questions that are raised by its study do not fail to become present.

If, on the one hand, the way in which anthropology has thought about power does not dispense with ethnography, and Han, at first glance, does not associate himself with it. On the other hand, like anthropology, he is engaged in thinking about what power means in relation to others. These disembodied others, since Han does not evoke any subject as we would in anthropology, are, however, the common representations of power that permeate different current images. His text is, as I said, provocative, but as Ingold (2017) suggests, his considerations help to shed light on the world, public debates and controversies in social life, places where anthropology can finally take place. One reason to still think about power is precisely to encourage the analysis of different constellations of power, on the one hand, but also to perhaps imagine what an anthropological concept about it would imply, on the other.

Despite being extensively debated, images such as the ones in which power is



what oppresses and inflicts violence; in which power is what is capable of saying no; in which human beings incessantly search for power; or even in those which politics is a field that creates power and that all power emerges from the State, are resistant images in our representations. They say something, but, essentially, when we choose to treat power from this theoretically purified place, such concepts also prevent us from describing other relations. However, by adopting a critical perspective regarding the concept of power, we would open up the possibility of considering which model of relations underlies this idea when we use it in our productions.

It has become increasingly common that, instead of studies on clearly distinguishable objects or institutions, we are more interested in processes, relationships, ideas. Many of the difficulties that seem to emerge in anthropology education today seem to arise from the clash between a theoretical training concerned with the particularization and objectification of unmistakable “cultural contexts”, when our fields of research, on the other hand, are all multiply constituted, crossed, multi-situated, tensioned, disputed. Thinking about this dialogue, Han may perhaps be one step closer to anthropology than one would initially imagine.

Perhaps, the main issue in Byung-Chul Han’s work on power is the idea that power is a causal relation between a self and another where the first imposes what it desires on the second. Although this conclusion is not far from anthropology, it is still a thought-provoking inference about the way the word “power” circulates in our everyday lives. Most of the meanings attributed to the word power in dictionaries, for example, use adjectives such as strength, authority, control, domination, imposition, obedience, superiority as some of its qualifications. This testifies to the way in which power seems tied to an image of the imposition of one self over another. When he draws attention to this problem of principle in the way power is theorized, Han somewhat agrees with political anthropology when he notices that there must, after all, be something more to power than just this model of relationship (Balandier 1969).

In this sense, it is worth paying attention to the details and events that make up the constellations of power, perhaps recognizing the need to make anthropology more attentive to other relational constructions. It is for this reason, it seems to me, that a text like Han’s deserves to be read in anthropology, for the call it makes for dense and systematic attention to the concept of power. I tried to read the author against the grain, perhaps shifting his attention from the purely philosophical debate to the contribution he makes, implicitly, to an ethnography of power, in the sense of simply highlighting how power is a category that often circulates in a trivialized and subsumed way.

Han’s central postulate – the (re)articulation between power-violence-freedom and the place of mediation, absence and relationship in the concept of power – may be pressing at a time when we are increasingly witnessing rapid and powerful transformations in constellations of power that surround us. His discussion can contribute to the development of an ethnographic sensitivity in relation to issues



of power and, following Ingold's (2017) lead, also make anthropology engage with more open comments about power that are not restricted to the collection of ethnographic cases.



About the author

Assistant Professor at the Federal University of Roraima, affiliated with the Institute of Anthropology and the Graduate Program in Social Anthropology (PPGANTS/UFRR). Associate researcher at the Institute of Science and Technology Brasil Plural (INCT/IBP/UFSC) and at the Center for Global Mental Health (UC San Diego). Email: fernando.ciello@gmail.com

Author's contribution

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