anuário antropológico
v. 48 • nº 1 • janeiro-abril • 2023.1

Réplica

Reply

DOI: https://doi.org/10.4000/aa.10529

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This is probably the first academic debate between interethnic anthropologists about the possible transformations of our discipline triggered by the arrival of indigenous practitioners. After glancing at texts written by indigenous people in other countries, I have not found anything similar, only the recurring – and perfectly understandable – issue of Western colonization and its effects on indigenous peoples around the world. Native anthropologists from the United States, Canada, and elsewhere in the Americas expose their difficulties as native professionals in the academic milieu, but do not try to change the discipline. Important works, such as those by Linda Tuhiwai Smith (Maori, New Zealand), Margaret Kovach (First Nations, Canada), Shawn Wilson (Cree, Canada), Gregory Cajete (Tewa, United States), and Devon Mihesuah (Choctaw, United States), among many others, focus on developing indigenous research methods. Important contributions as these are to improve knowledge in the academy, their goal is to devise scientific procedures apart from Western canons. In turn, we try to go a little further. We bring up indigenous procedures to produce and acquire knowledge as an attempt to change certain traditional academic habits, particularly in anthropology.

Begun at the anthropology department in the University of Brasília, this initiative contemplates the possibility of creating a context open to innovation brought in by indigenous intellectuals. I hope the present dialogue will prompt the organization of events such as seminars and courses that will bring out aspirations, projects, and expectations about an anthropology that will be receptive of other worldviews and other epistemologies. We seek to make the discipline more faithful to its centuries-old vocation to encompass human diversity in its totality. We would like to see other authors and other topics engage in debates about the importance of anthropology in constant flow, setting Brazil as a pioneer in opening novel ways to envision and to practice anthropology.

By no means do we intend to dismiss the founding premises of anthropology, dispense with its classics, or reject the anthropological gaze. After all, without these elements, there would be no anthropology at all. To the contrary, debates like this should enrich the discipline with premises we just begin to envisage. They are noteworthy, field researchers know and admire them, but for a number of reasons, they are tucked away in the hermetic space of “ethnography.”

Felipe Tuxá, Francisco Sarmento, and Gersem Baniwa have ties with the Graduate Program in Social Anthropology of the University of Brasilia. Their commentaries take the subject matter of my article to new levels. As a non-indigenous anthropologist, I express my uneasiness with the discipline’s state of the art, but it is not up to me to follow the path these three indigenous intellectuals have trodden in the fields of anthropology. To listen to them is important. To read them is mandatory. As I look at their comments, I notice that our common denominator is much larger than I expected, considering our distinct origins, generations, and trajectories. I have the feeling that my experimental, hesitant, and risky text gains volume and seems more convincing when I see it through their eyes. They reinforce my conviction that, after all, I am not preaching in the desert. There is, indeed, something real and urgent to be discussed.

Let us first examine the points the three commentaries have in common and then address their individual aspects. All three consider that pursuing a career in anthropology is strategic to empower indigenous peoples, as it instructs the students on the use of its analytical tools. In command of anthropological concepts, they are equipped to make qualified arguments that are intelligible to State authorities and convince them to guarantee the defense of indigenous rights.

As modern anthropology rejected value judgments about the legitimacy and pertinence of the innumerable cultural manifestations worldwide, it developed techniques and postures to decode different logical systems that are mutually irreducible. For over a century, non-indigenous anthropologists accumulated a plethora of information about non-Western societies. Today old ethnographies are useful to many peoples as they help the new generations in their effort to recover nearly lost traditions. However, this is not the main reason why indigenous students choose anthropology. As Tuxá, Sarmento, and Baniwa point out, what attracts them are the mechanisms, procedures, and postures anthropology has developed to understand Otherness. The same devices used by non-indigenous researchers to grasp indigenous worlds now help indigenous scholars decipher Western logic. Anthropological tools provide indigenous students with strategic knowledge capable of subverting the imbalance of forces that humiliates and diminishes them by imposing the hegemony of "scientific" knowledge in detriment of ancestral knowledge. As a corollary of such subversion, to match the teachings of a James Frazer imprinted in Western erudite writing to the teachings of an elderly indigenous sage, recited in a cozy village, should no longer hurt academic sensitivities as occasionally happens in classrooms.

A second aspect common to the three commentaries, closely linked to the former, is that anthropology provides the knowledge that is needed to disclose the Other, namely, Whites. With their long experience in observing anthropologists transforming ethnographic curiosity into knowledge – erroneous as it may be – about indigenous societies, it would be just a matter of time and opportunity for the reverse to happen, turning the observer into observed and vice-versa. Hence, it is crucial that indigenous students appropriate anthropology as a discipline that is also indigenous. Observation and interpretation are already part of the indigenous universe. All they needed was to master the idiom of anthropology to enlarge and deepen both features. One lesson we learn from anthropology is contained in the old saying that a fish is the worst observer of the sea. In other words, to withdraw, to take distance sharpens one's sense of perspective. Just as Alexis de Tocqueville, the French aristocrat intent in understanding the workings of North-American democracy, observed many things the Americans, like fishes in the ocean, were unable to see, so are indigenous intellectuals in a privileged position to observe and analyze the world of Whites that surrounds them, but does not blind them.

The third point the commentators raise is the fear that indigenous appropriation may disfigure anthropology, provoking a decline in scientific quality and bringing in the risk of excessive politization. This fear, perceptible in certain sectors of department life, reveals mostly a resistance to change the ways of anthropology, which, as any unpredictable change, might drive established anthropologists away from their comfort zone. Nevertheless, as the three commentators affirm, there is no reason to fear, because, far from being a menace to anthropology, indigenous scholars will make academy more profound and attractive. If such fear really exists, it exposes an anti-anthropological posture as it unveils prejudices that the discipline always fought, namely, the abominable belief that whatever is different is, necessarily, inferior. Devotion to sanctified canons has been responsible for the intellectual inertia that plagues many areas of knowledge, identified by Thomas Kuhn as "normal science." Safeguarding the founding principles as inscribed in the classical texts of anthropology, innovations thrust it forward. As philosopher Hans-George Gadamer stated, a stagnant tradition is a dead tradition. The fear of an indigenized anthropology is an idle anxiety, because, from the very beginning, anthropology has always been indigenized, for no other reason than it gets its nurture and longevity precisely from the indigenous world.

The fourth point common to the three commentaries stresses the importance of combining indigenous and non-indigenous anthropological outlooks. Not only is this argument salutary, but it is also necessary. When realizing that many current ethnographies reduce or distort indigenous realities, indigenous intellectuals suggest the adoption of an "interepistemic" stance in the teaching of anthropology as a remedy for misunderstandings, particularly in fieldwork. Bringing a variety of epistemes to the academic tool kit allows us to examine plural visions that either converge or diverge, thus inhibiting premature, immature or outright wrong statements. It would be similar to compare the same tradition at different moments in history. Historian and geographer David Lowenthal, appropriately, moved in space and time. We might say with him that the past is a foreign country. Inversely, remembering a critical anthropologist, we could evoke yet another adage: the present is always coeval, regardless of where we speak from (Fabian 1983). The interethnic debate among anthropologists, which we hope to launch with this celebration of the 50th year of the Graduate Program in Social Anthropology at the University of Brasilia, should provide opportunities to cross perspectives and enlarge the horizon on both sides.

The fifth and final point proposes the rejection of hierarchy the commentators detect in interethnic relations within academia, a reflection of the inequality in the world at large. We have here a sore point that needs attention. The term hierarchy has distinct meanings in dictionaries and in common sense. It is important to know which meaning the commentators reject. One dictionary definition says that hierarchy is "an organization based on the order of priority between elements in a cluster, or on relations of subordination between members of a group, with consecutive degrees of power, situation, or responsibility." It is applicable, at least partially, to the structure of a university. Obviously, there is a ranking distinction between faculty and students based on their respective levels of knowledge. Regarding the amount of knowledge they master, the students are, necessarily, at the subordinate end of the organization. Nevertheless, these same students, as individuals, will shift to the opposite end when they become faculty members. In such case, we have a hierarchy pertaining solely to the training process of professionals, not to a permanent, personal subordination. It is inevitable that professors occupy positions of authority from which they must instruct the students, always considering that the latter can also be a source of knowledge to the professors.

The other, common sense, meaning of hierarchy, in the case of universities, confuses rank based on knowledge with domination based on political power. I believe the commentaries presented here reject the latter connotation, which carries the brand of social inequality. If this occurs, all parties concerned must promptly condemn it, be they faculty members, students, or staff. One of the reasons to engage in debates like this is, precisely, to ponder the difference between qualified knowledge and common sense opinions. Nevertheless, over and above any discussion, to rank knowledge from distinct cultural traditions, within and without academia, especially in anthropology, is and will always be inadmissible.

Now, taking the commentaries individually, there are some noteworthy points, regardless of style and emphasis. In Gersem Baniwa, an experienced anthropologist in indigenous education, we notice a strong alignment with the essence of the discipline, which he sees as both a villain and an ally. He exposes its negative face with no qualms in this passage straight from the Portuguese original. “We can’t help being nauseated … when we find out that, in referring to us, they [anthropologists] concocted notions, concepts, categories, and theories which based, and still do, racism and prejudice against us.” On the positive side, anthropology cultivates the vocation to be open to alterity and to legitimate it uncompromisingly. Watching anthropologists in action has whetted indigenous appetite to know more about themselves. “We have spent centuries observing and silently trying to understand White anthropologists both in our villages and territories and outside…, but we had never opened our hearts and minds to know and understand ourselves a little more, beyond immediate impressions, appearances, and interests,” Baniwa confesses. The result was the indigenous appropriation of that great ethnographic treasure held in anthropology’s custody. Because “the indigenous entrance and permanence in anthropology is irreversible,” Baniwa proposes strategies to “create solid conditions for this dialogue to happen and prosper in frank, honest, systemic, and institutional ways.” As a strategist, he sees clearly how to achieve what he defends. Moreover, he can already detect some changes: “Solitary and individual researchers and ethnographers are making room for collective and community researchers,” he says.

Less patient with the academic and disciplinary shortcomings, Felipe Tuxá, an energetic young university professor, focuses his commentary less in written production and more in the actions of anthropologists against the backdrop of the “old power relations and maintenance of structural privileges.” A keen observer of irony, he notices how small details may say volumes, like in a play of mirrors reflecting traditional observers (anthropologists) observing the traditionally observed (indigenous) observing traditional observers in the act of observing. The graphic effect seems as impossible to the eye as Escher’s disconcerting drawings. Yet, such situations do exist and occur ever more frequently. Adept to the idea of engaging in interethnic debates within anthropology, Felipe insists that such debates must not lose sight of the wider context of inequality, that is, the political field that surrounds indigenous peoples. Averse to dashing generalizations, he defends the importance of treating indigenous themes by observing their specificities. When he states that "no subject is Universal, and that all have to have their position taken into consideration," this being the starting point "for any attempt to interethnic communication," Felipe espouses the most humanist version of anthropology.

Francisco Sarmento applies his philosophy training to the issue of indigenous students entering anthropology not as research objects, but as intellectual peers. Like Gersem Baniwa, Sarmento recognizes the colonial origins of the discipline, but also that it has provided indigenous peoples with useful tools. Regarding indigenous students of anthropology who have not overcome their revolt against domination, he condemns what he sees as their shortsightedness when they blame anthropology for the old evils of Eurocentrism. Amidst attempts to purge indigenous peoples from their stolen territories, Francisco reminds us of the solidarity anthropologists showed as "some of the few to side with indigenous peoples and to believe they could go on." Yes, anthropology was born in Europe, but, to a large extent, was raised among indigenous peoples. Moreover, "as it becomes more democratic toward these Others, it expands its range of possibilities." In other words, indigenous peoples have taught anthropology to be more anthropological. More profound and informative ethnographies written by non-indigenous anthropologists begin to appear. In short, Francisco provides the motto for this debate and my article when he says, "if all of this is handled with care and intelligence, indigenous scholars will play a remarkable role in anthropology"!

It is my great pleasure to interact with Gersem Baniwa, Felipe Tuxá, and Francisco Sarmento. With their distinct interethnic experiences and their own styles, they join me in our effort to make anthropology ever so wise.

Brasília, 11 November 2022

Recebido em 14/03/2023
Aprovado para publicação em 15/03/2023 pela editora Kelly Silva (https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3388-2655)

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