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Nossa modesta insubmissão

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The essay “*Sobre a descolonização e seus correlatos*” (“On decolonization and its correlates”) comes at a most opportune moment. And it is not just because it coincides with the 50th anniversary of “25 de abril” (April 25) – a milestone of decolonization and the end of the Portuguese Empire. There are other circumstances that make this text up-to-date and even timeless. In recent years, for example, the themes of colonization and decolonization have grown within Brazilian social science, in particular Anthropology. Wilson Trajano Filho, who is a pioneer of African Studies in Brazil, as well as having trained several generations of anthropologists, has played an important role in this debate. His essay will therefore be more than welcome among all those interested in this topic.

In the first part of his essay, Trajano offers us, as the methodologists would say, the “state-of-the-art” of the matter, including a detailed summary of the vicissitudes of postcolonial and decolonial criticism in its Latin American, Indian and African variants. This is a vast and complex debate. Despite all the nuances, and at the risk of caricature, I dare to suggest that, to a large extent, postcolonial intellectuals have built their critiques with their backs turned on anthropological knowledge as such. At times, ignorance of the discipline’s history, its protagonists, and its internal divisions was directly proportional to the virulence of the accusations that were made: the most banal and predictable accusation being the one that proposed a direct and mechanical complicity between anthropology and colonialism. Although postcolonial (or, if you prefer, decolonial) thinking is spread over many disciplines, I shall focus my comments on the impact that Trajano’s essay may have on Anthropology. To honour this intellectual conversation, I would like to make explicit two symmetrically opposed and complementary warnings: 1. There are several topics discussed by the author with which I thoroughly agree. I list some: his distrust of the decolonial trend; the avoidance of teleological temptations when investigating the dynamics of colonization and decolonization; the importance of looking at things from the perspective of the agency of colonial society’s various and multiple actors (thus exorcizing the simplistic “dominant/dominated” dichotomy). I also cherish his ethnographic invitation to study socialities, sensitivities, and corporalities within the colonial world (pertaining to sports, music, fashion...). All of this constitutes an effective tool to avoid self-explanatory and tautological temptations. As if this weren’t enough, the author also provides a historicization of concepts for the sake of much needed clarity, thereby going against a methodological anarchism that often disguise as “politically correct” position. In this case, if colonialism is really everywhere – and here I invoke Walter D. Mignolo’s postulate – then such omnipresence ends up depriving the concept of any materiality, that is, the very materiality to which the concept was intended to allude to in the first place. After all, what are the empirical attributes that grant historicity to the colonial experience? Trajano’s essay undoubtedly contributes to shedding light on this murky path. 2. However, there is another equally challenging dimension to his proposal that merits further consideration. I refer principally to the programmatic aspect of the essay’s second part, in which the criticism (of the “idea of culture as a set of distinctive traits, which are exclusive

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properties of cultural systems...”) goes hand in hand with proposing an analogy between socio-cultural creolization and linguistic creolization.

By distrusting quasi-metaphysical dichotomies (which are without any ethnographic content), such as “East/West”, Trajano honours the polyphony of our disciplinary tradition. Then, living up to an anthropophagic vocation, he warns us: “... a plan of action should be not so much to decolonize epistemology, science, disciplines, universities and regions of the world, but rather to swallow and to digest that which once was seen as belonging to others and thus make it truly ours...”. The device he sets forth to understand and to promote such a task is creolization. That is, a radical synthesis or, to use one of the author’s favorite terms, a “creative synthesis” capable of conjuring the most threatening essentialisms. It seems that creolization is sometimes used as an analogy with the phenomena studied by sociolinguistics, and sometimes as a metaphor. In either case, the author is aware that the analogy-metaphor between language and culture has its limitations. There are, therefore, precautions to be taken when moving from linguistic creolization to “sociocultural creolization”.

At this stage, it is important to point out that, by appealing to the *linguistic turn*, Trajano is not proposing a romanticized or bucolic version of the colonization processes. Hierarchies, inequalities, violence, power and everything that Sherry Ortner (2016) has called the “dark side” of sociocultural life intervene, more than anywhere else, in the colonial world. The author, in his own research – notably on Guinea Bissau – has consistently drawn attention to this dimension. I suspect, however, that Trajano himself is aware that the heuristic device of creolization has its own ambiguities. There is, on the one hand, an optimism that is difficult to assimilate without raising objections. Celebrating Ulf Hannerz, Trajano states, without hesitating: “...The unveiling of a multipolar human world in an advanced stage of creolization is glimpsed today,...”. I confess that I am not sure about the scope of this *good news*. I fear that this statement is only applicable to a more or less recent disciplinary past, when anthropology – in its legitimate struggle against all forms of nacio-centrism – reflected on the “localized” globalization (Appadurai, 1996), the “indigenization” of the West (Sahlins, 1997) and on a new *ecumene* resulting from creolization (Hannerz, 1996). I would say that this anthropology of transnational connections has become outdated and belongs to a world that no longer exists. A paradigm shift began to be gestated after September 11, 2001, with the attacks on the Twin Towers in New York, and the consequent “war on terror” which followed (Mamdani, 2004). Since then, the dark side to which Ortner alludes has been increasingly consummated. This finding does not mean that we have to stop ethnographic inquiry exploring the creation of new universes of meaning. I agree with Trajano when he says that it is necessary to “go beyond the fatalism inherent in many decolonial studies”. However, it seems to me that the end of cosmopolitanism, the rebuilding of walls and borders and the rise of xenophobic and exclusivist practices and discourses forces us to tone down any anthropophagic optimism.

On the other hand – and still in pursuit of ambiguities – I cannot see the extent

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to which Trajano's essay manages to expel, or not, the notion of "culture". Within his systemic, holistic and, let's say, representational bias, there is undoubtedly a condemnation of the concept. But when the author speaks to us in terms of cultural creolization, doesn't the very notion (which had just been expelled and thrown outside the door) now return, almost surreptitiously, through the window, if you will? I wonder if, in its native version, creolization would not end up incubating, quite paradoxically, a potential essentialism. From an ethnographic point of view, we do not have a univocal answer.¹ But what do we do when our analytical categories embark on an anti-essentialism that, at the same time, is contested by the culturalist agency of the "natives" themselves?

At this point, despite my discreet methodological distrust of the term creolization, I am aware that it does not come to surface on the mere whim of the author or, much less, out of a purely bookish concern. Far from this, it emerges from the experience of societies in which Trajano carried out field research, notably Guinea Bissau and Cape Verde. For this reason, and as much as his text is a kind of neo-anthropophagic micro-treaty, I prefer to see it as a generous ethnographic research program which could be capable of rescuing us from seductive decolonial phraseology.

This time, and without ambiguity, culture does work like language. This analogy, it should be noted, has nothing to do with Levi-Straussian constructs but rather with the inspiration of sociolinguistics, of the field of pragmatics (which owes much to the theories of "acts of speech") and with symbolic interactionism (which, in its Goffmanian strand, has been much exploited by Trajano himself [cf. his bibliography: Trajano Filho, 2011]). Undoubtedly, this interactionist inspiration perfectly communicates with the best anthropological tradition of the so-called Manchester School, the one that, despite its toponymy, was not born in Manchester, but in today's Zambia (!), thanks to a plethora of anthropologists who were not only "British", but, above all, African [Schumaker, 2001]. Therefore, I cannot separate Trajano's research on the processions of Cape Verdean *tabancas*, for example, from a lineage of foundational works such as those carried out at the Rhodes-Livingstone Institute. After all, one should keep in mind that Clyde Mitchell's inspiring ethnography on the "Kalela dance" has much to do with interactionism, agency, performance and, in Trajano's own words, "creative syntheses". However, and to live up to this anti-essentialist genealogy, one must remember that the very notion of "colonial situation", as coined by Georges Balandier, received much input from the anthropological experiences of Max Gluckman and the Rhodes-Livingstone Institute's staff.

Trajano attributes to some of the main representatives of decolonial thought the motives of youthful rebellion and, in other passages, of conservative rebellion. In this case, the author refers fundamentally to the Latin American group (Walter Mignolo, Anibal Quijano and, to a lesser extent, I suppose, Enrique Dussel). It seems to me that this label could be extended to much of post-structuralist thought that, from the 1980s onwards, engaged in a critique of certain canons of social science which can be traced to nineteenth-century rationalism. I agree that there is something of a radicalism rendered harmless, or conservative radicalism in the decolonial thrusts. Proudly insubmissive, decolonial theorists condemn an

1 I suspect that another fruitful research agenda opens up here: I refer to the numerous possibilities, in the most diverse ethnographic contexts (Caribbean, West Africa, Louisiana, etc.), in which "creole pride" or creole identity can take, in its own way and for the actors themselves, the form of an essentialism averse to porosities and cultural reinventions.

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almost mythical Hobessian monster: the West. It is an abstract condemnation, which offers us neither a first name nor a surname. That's why it's a harmless rebellion. However, despite the success of decolonial criticism among the young generations of social scientists, it does not seem to me that such an attitude results from a youthful spirit, or anything like that. In fact, we are talking about *senior* thinkers who, during their youth in the 1960s and 1970s, partook in ECLAC's thinking², participated in political movements that opposed the dictatorships of Latin America (some, such as Dussel, had to go into exile), studied political economy and, of course, read "*Das Kapital*". It turns out that for many social scientists, political economy has become boring, while developmentalist thinking has been overshadowed by the prophets of the free market. And, as if that were not enough, Marxism has become a dangerous sorcerer: in the utterances of decolonialists Marxism began to be denounced as Eurocentric and an accomplice of the West.

Now, in all such developments there is also another dimension, one that is both broader and slippery. In this case, these are questions that cannot be addressed in a few lines, such as: why does a theory or an author become canonical? What are the editorial, institutional and other mechanisms (pertaining to the circulation of ideas) that allow such consecration? Eric Wolf (1982), in an almost forgotten book, showed us the global and local connections of economy and culture, giving name and surname to the actors and protagonists of colonial expansion and capitalism. But, as an old adage says, "it is not enough to be right; you have to be effective."

I began my comment by pointing out the opportune moment at which this essay appears. I conclude in like vein. Thanks to its relevance and erudition, Trajano's text joins other reference works on the subject. I think, above all, of the contribution of Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler (1997) entitled "Between Metropole and Colony: Rethinking a Research Agenda". At the risk of being repetitive, I envision his work as a research agenda always open to new discoveries. I believe that this programmatic dimension of the essay is consistent with the discomfort that Trajano expresses regarding the "obesity of concepts". Some of them resonate more than others: "coloniality of power"; "epistemicide"; "liminal gnosis"; "pluritopic hermeneutics", "transmodernity".

What does all this conceptual spectacularization contribute to when we aim only to establish some connections? Our questions perhaps are humbler or, according to a certain sociological jargon, more "Middle Range" oriented: What invisible connections exist between a Mozambican peasant from the district of Guijá (in Gaza province) and a Port wine lover linked to the textile industry of northern Portugal? What is the relationship between the forced production of cotton in northern Mozambique and the disruption in the transmission of *ni-himo* (i.e. the transmission of the name of the ancestors) among the Makua (or *Makhuwa*) groups of that country? The ethnographic cases pertaining to these connections could multiply *ad infinitum*, and anthropology has been striving for decades to map them. In addition, it would be unfair to deny the good intentions of the decolonial *troupe*. At times, it happens to be quite difficult to know where

2 One of the first articles by the "young" Aníbal Quijano, entitled "Urbanización, cambio social y dependencia," was published in 1967 in a book organized by Fernando Henrique Cardoso and Francisco Weffort (cf. Cardoso, F. H., and F. Weffort, eds. *América Latina. Ensayos de interpretación sociológica*. Santiago de Chile: Editorial Universitaria).

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all this carnivalization leads us in which the most diverse authors and political and historical figures – from the most varied contexts – are called to participate in the same contestatory *bricolage*: Frantz Fanon, Tupac Amaru, José Martí, Rodolfo Kusch, José Carlos Mariátegui, Rigoberta Menchú, Edouard Glissant, Toussaint L'Overture, in addition to others somewhat more unimaginable such as Homi Bhabha and Jacques Derrida.

Finally, Trajano's work brings a quota of common sense and reflection in times that remain very troubled. One could think of the heated debate that took place within the *American Anthropological Association*, after the inaugural speech given by Akhil Gupta in 2021. "What would have become of our discipline if it had been constituted as a decolonizing project?"³ Gupta asked his audience. Once again, colonial "guilt" weighs on anthropology. The story is not new, but the characters and circumstances are renewed. Herbert Lewis, an old heir to the *Four Fields* and the finest strain of American cultural anthropology (i.e., humanistic, anti-racist, and concerned with fieldwork), rushed to contest some of the historical inaccuracies conveyed at his colleague's conference.⁴ Condemning our ancestors as a whole does not help the discussion. To go beyond *slogans*, historicizing our own practice or, as a well-known author says, "objectifying the objectifying subject" is a *sine qua non* condition. Therefore, I believe that the social and political histories of our discipline help to broaden the notion of ethnography (always guided by the false synchrony/diachrony separation). This kind of epistemological vigilance seems to me a good way to prevent breaking down doors that are already open. In addition, I suspect that the decolonialists are not interested in the challenge that continues to obsess us: making good ethnographies. After all, these are artifacts capable of disrupting the most resilient teleologies and essentialisms. That is, I believe, our humble insubmission.

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3 A version of the conference was published in 2022, under the title "Decolonizing US anthropology," in volume 124, no. 4, pages 778-799, of *American Anthropologist*.

4 Hebert Lewis' response, entitled "On the Counterfactual History of Anthropology," circulated in the websites and medias of some anthropology associations. See: https://easaonline.org/downloads/networks/hoan/HOAN_Newsletter_21j-202112_Lewis_Open_Letter_AAA.pdf

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