



Comment to Stephen Baines' article

Comentário ao artigo de Stephen Baines

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Francesca Merlan

The Australian National University, School of Archaeology and Anthropology. Canberra, Federal District, Australia.

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2740-1379>



I appreciate having been asked to comment on the career of Stephen Grant Baines. However, I must say clearly at the outset that my knowledge of the Brazilian anthropological scene is limited. I have been a researcher, teacher, head of department and professor in Australia with long-standing research experience with Indigenous Australian people, communities, and issues inside and outside the academy, a broader interest in Indigenous peoples world-wide, and in fundamentally related matters, such as colonialism, transformation, and Indigenous socio-politics. It is in relation to the conduct of anthropological research with indigenous peoples, and national contexts in which such research is done, that I got to know Stephen.

Stephen was a visitor at the Department of Archaeology and Anthropology, Australian National University, Canberra, in 2010 when I was Head of Department. He came with a specific interest in Indigenous peoples and issues in Australia. He had previously made some contacts in Australia. In 1979, he investigated the possibility of taking a degree at the University of Western Australia, but went instead to Cambridge, where he conducted research under Alan MacFarlane, studying by-then extensive Brazilian work under the rubric of "interethnic contact". He then did his PhD in Brazil under Julio Cezar Melatti (Ramos 1990, 461–5 traces Melatti's anthropological lineage); that thesis was published in 1991. From 1991, Stephen became a member of two research projects led by Roberto Cardoso de Oliveira – Ramos 1990, 463–5), first on Styles of Anthropology in National Contexts, and later a second project on Nationality and Ethnicity on Borders. He treated Australia as a research focus across this time, visiting first in 1992 (Baines 1993, 4), and returning in 2010. On the basis of shared interests and experience in Indigenous affairs, and in anthropology's place in the various colonized countries that Stephen visited and has commented on (Brazil, Australia, Canada), I accepted to write this piece, with the disclaimer that it deals only selectively with Stephen's research work and writing, raising some issues of shared interest which I think could be developed.

From my under-prepared background, I first considered (with, admittedly, only myself as the sounding board): who are the best-known Brazilian anthropologists of Brazilian Indigenous societies today outside Brazil, and especially those widely read in the Anglo-sphere? Alcida Ramos and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, it seemed to me, stood out as such. I emphasize that I was thinking here of the past several decades only, not earlier. I do read Portuguese, which is for me, as a Spanish speaker, much easier to read than to hear, given my limited time in lusophone countries; but I was thinking about who had made greatest breakthroughs to a global academic audience, and that – as politically incorrect as it may be to say – implies an English textual presence.

This conclusion made me feel I needed to read what each author had had to say about tendencies, schools and streams in Brazilianist indigenist anthropology (which of course has not been limited to Brazilian practitioners and influences). Among important commentaries, it seemed to me, two stood out: Alcida Ramos' article on ethnography Brazilian style (1990), and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro's *Etnologia Brasileira* (1999). In combination, these articles gave me, I thought, some



guidance on how to position my reading of Stephen Baines' work.

Stephen undertook fieldwork with the Waimiri-Atroari from 1982, with main periods of field time between 1983 and 1985. By that time, Waimiri-Atroari had been gathered into settlements and were subject to FUNAI efforts to get them to lead a regularized, "civilized" life. He tells us that the FUNAI and other authorities sought to restrict his investigation of what he saw as rank inequalities and the forms of derogation to which the Waimiri-Atroari were subjected. He also tells us that local people were affected by some of the FUNAI employees' attitudes towards him. He was made to suspend research in this area in 1989, blocked by corporate and other authorities who apparently contrived to foment objection to his research work on the part of local people (Baines 1993, 29).

The published version of Stephen's thesis (1991) was introduced by his supervisor, Julio Cezar Melatti. Melatti mentions some interesting aspects of Stephen's style and method; namely, as Stephen himself writes in places, that it has a certain "autobiographical" aspect; and that his work shows him to be "etnógrafo atento e perspicaz, a quem os próprios sonhos serviam como pistas para a elucidação de problemas". Melatti characterized the thesis as a study in "contato interétnico", observing that it portrayed the indigenous people as being at the mercy of FUNAI; and that the thesis raised "ambiguous emotions" in him: "Se, por um lado, me era gratificante lidar com um pesquisador interessado, assíduo, que levava em consideração todas as ponderações e reparos, por outro, deprimia-me ter de conhecer informações sobre índios em tão triste situação".

Stephen also introduces himself as a protégé of Roberto Cardoso de Oliveira, both in the latter's development of the rubric of *fricção interétnica*, and his concern with styles of anthropology. While de Oliveira was also engaged philosophically with the ethics of anthropological research, Stephen has typically adopted not a reflective stance, but one of political viewpoint. One feels in the material that he presents his outrage concerning the conditions and oppression of the Waimiri-Atroari over decades (Baines 1991, 1991a, 1991b, 1994, 1999).

Alcida Ramos (1990) has argued that Brazilian anthropology has long been characterized by the presence, on the one hand, of political activism and advocacy on behalf of Brazilian Indians, seen as the national "others" and systematically oppressed; and on the other, of academic scholarship. The extent to which particular ethnographers have engaged in both scholarship and activism has varied; but characteristic of Stephen's work is his strong reporting on "interethnic contact" and friction, manifested in his early work on the relations of Waimiri-Atroari with FUNAI workers, and more distantly, with encroaching large mining and other projects.

He details the colonial incursions to which the Waimiri-Atroari have been subjected over time: forced dispersal, appalling decimation by violence and epidemic disease, state and private corporate development projects including road-building, mining, the construction of the Balbina Hydroelectric Scheme by Eletronorte in land subtracted from the Waimiri-Atroari reserve, and most especially, forms of co-optation by FUNAI, including the establishment of *Frentes de Atração* designed



to control them. The list of atrocities and impositions is frightful, but unfortunately has its counterparts in the other colonized countries with which Baines has made comparisons, Australia and Canada. It all raises questions about the terms under which colonized people live under such continuous onslaughts; but it is in this respect that this reader wishes to know more about exactly that.

As one of the forms of domination, in his book and in various articles, Stephen focuses on the deployment of ethnic identities by FUNAI's Indian (but non-local) employees. These were people "provenientes de áreas aculturadas" (1991, 254) who were seen (and saw themselves) as superior to local Indians; Baines describes them as largely drawn "da classe trabalhadora regional" (1991, 277). These FUNAI workers were attracted to the better salaries they were able to command by working in a *Frente de Atração*, the situation of the Warimiri-Atroari of Stephen's research. Despite fundamental inequalities, such FUNAI workers were at pains to present themselves to local Waimiri-Atroari as "índios", thus staking a claim to identification with the local population. These FUNAI employees strengthened and reinforced binarism of categories by designating as "others" those they called *brancos* (literally, 'whites', including Stephen himself; see Baines 1994, 6-7, for further discussion of this category; also Baines 1991). The FUNAI employees used forms of categorization as modes of domination (e.g., insisting on the legitimacy of their sexual access to Waimiri-Atroari women). They sought to make Waimiri-Atroari adopt the practices and mores of "civilized" Indians that they wanted to inculcate, as they tried to induct them into a regimented agricultural subsistence life. This involved delegating tasks (like weeding) to men that, indigenously, would have been seen as women's tasks; making the regime of work such that hunting became restricted to weekends (1991, 180); and treating women as if their tasks were solely those of the household (1991, 181). The FUNAI workers also appointed as Captains (or *caciques* or other foreign terms for local leaders) young men, on the grounds that there were no longer elders available, having been eliminated in the epidemics and other circumstances (1991, 280). These "captains" were favoured by FUNAI with special treatment of various kinds – and were also encouraged to introduce into a highly disrupted social field mandated forms of social differentiation and command. Stephen walked through some of the countryside previously occupied by Waimiri-Atroari with them, documenting recollections of epidemics and abandonment of *malocas*. Once resettled, the "only option for them was to internalize the rules of the official indigenist policy based on a model of regional economic development, adopting the FAWA's model of 'civilized Indian'" (1994, 5). The change from longhouses to living in the Indians posts occurred fairly rapidly, between 1978 and 1981 (*ibid.*).

The Waimiri-Atroari were encapsulated in colonial institutions like Attraction Fronts and pressured to accept official views of this as for their advancement; and further, to produce discourses of indigenous self-determination to legitimize the action of the administration (Baines 1999). In these interactions, Stephen shows that the authorities spoke in terms of indigenous participation in agreement-making. However, Stephen sees such representations as erroneous and deceptive, in



that indigenist policy is financed by large companies and subordinated to entrepreneurial interests.

In colonized countries, public opinion of Indigenous peoples regularly oscillates between concepts of them as savage and uncivilized, but also (and often concurrently, even if it seems contradictory) as noble and admirable in some ways (Berkhofer 1979 on North America, Ramos 1994 on Brazil, Peters-Little 2003 on Australia), with corollary attributions of authenticity and inauthenticity to those who seem most and least traditional. Further to the FUNAI modes of domination, Stephen observes that in Brazil, there is widespread public opinion of Indians as “savage” and uncivilized. In that context, the FUNAI revamped earlier histories and memories of genuine Waimiri-Atroari resistance (killings of outsiders by Waimiri-Atroari at Attraction Front points known to have occurred in the early twentieth century, and more recently a particular episode in 1972-3) with a remodelled designation of Waimiri-Atroari as “resistant”, fashioning them as stereotypically valiant, heroic Indians (despite their current situation of encapsulation). In Stephen’s view, this publicly projected persona of the Waimiri-Atroari is FUNAI-dominated.

Stephen also focuses on a related form of deformation of local history and person that he largely attributes to the FUNAI presence and workers, in the first instance, and that seems to have wider resonance in Brazilian stereotypy: of the Waimiri-Atroari as uncivilised, with both negative (“violent”) and positive (“resistant”) valences.

Stephen’s work on the Waimiri-Atroari situation has some elements of ethnographic autobiography: Stephen refers in many places to his own treatment by both FUNAI and locals (though this never becomes an extended self-narrative). This might also be seen as a precursor of what today is often called “positionality”, a view of one’s own part in the situation.

Ethnographically Stephen’s work focuses on the relations between the locals and (especially) FUNAI workers. Interestingly, by the time of the thesis’ publication as a book in 1991, Stephen included a dedication to the Waimiri-Atroari, observing that the work had been subject to some criticism for presenting their situation as hopeless and them as “vítimas passivas da sociedade invasora”. Despite this, he says that the Waimiri-Atroari “continuam vivos e ativos, procurando um caminho para o futuro, caminho que eles mesmos estão prescrevendo”. The disparity between the depiction of domination, and that statement, raises questions. At this point I turn to some Australian and wider comparisons with the foregoing to illustrate other forms of outcome in a context of long-term pressure and influence.

“Deformations” and shaping of asymmetrical power relations have been typical of interaction between Indigenous people with outsiders in all colonial contexts. The shaping of asymmetries takes on different forms in changing conditions. In both Brazil and Australia, many early encounters were straightforwardly murderous, on the assumption by outsiders that indigenous people could be exterminated and dislocated, without much fear of retribution. Modern asymme-



tries must take account of changes in the public sphere and in many institutions, and can become much more delicately poised between apparently responding to indigenous needs and satisfying wider public expectations (which regularly tend towards limitation of indigenous action and gains). Many asymmetries still often remain based on an assumption that equalization of Indigenous status with that of others means the elimination of differences between Indigenous ways of being and practices of the wider society. Liberal multiculturalism tends to go further in purporting to value and accept difference. Povinelli (2002) has termed recent modes of liberal multicultural recognition “cunning”, in that they promulgate acceptance while in fact engraining new forms of subordination. Merlan (1998) had argued that new forms of recognition (such as land claims, and its institutional structures) effect the intersection of Indigenous practices and concepts with some of those originating the dominant society (cf. Nadasdy 2012).

To explore what may be seen as well-intentioned but also “cunning” at large scale: in Australia, states had the governmental powers to census and legislate in relation to Aborigines, rather than the national government, the Australian Commonwealth, until 1967. A Referendum – a national vote – held in 1967 was promoted publicly as a “Yes” vote for Aboriginal Australians – a vote to make them equal to other citizens by endorsing the power of the Commonwealth to legislate on their behalf where it might be necessary. This vote carried overwhelmingly, at the national level of 90%. The Referendum was phrased in terms of “equality”, making Aborigines equal to everyone else, emphasizing a concept that Australians take to be fundamental to national being (see e.g., Kapferer J. 1996); and indeed the condition of Aborigines was strikingly unequal. The Referendum seemed to promise much more than mere sameness, some kind of greater acceptance of Aborigines (and was widely misunderstood as promising more, Attwood and Markus 2007). Little attention was paid to the fact that, given the history of their expropriation, equality was not achievable by simply allowing the Commonwealth to legislate and census in relation to Aborigines. In fact, the Commonwealth was not thereby directed to take any particular action on their behalf, despite the declaration of equivalent civic status.

In 2023, over five decades later, another Referendum was held. It was called the “Voice” Referendum, and asked voters whether they agreed to alter the Constitution to recognise the First Peoples of Australia by establishing an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice (McAllister and Biddle 2024). What the “Voice” mechanism might be was not spelled out, leading many voters to suspect what it might be and to reject the concept. In proponents’ views, it was to be a mechanism whereby Aborigines would be empowered to scrutinize any legislation affecting Indigenous people (but, it was understood, in an advisory capacity and without right of veto). The argument raised against the Voice was that it would create a specifically Aboriginal Constitutional entity with unlimited or unknown scope and so erode a fundamental principle of democracy, the equality of citizenship. By some, it was seen as racially divisive (the negative notion of “race” trumping any concept of the originary status of Aborigines and rights that might attach to



this). So here a concept of equality played a role again, but was revealed for what it is widely taken to mean: that everyone, regardless of history, priority or anything else, is to be treated as the same, not distinctively or preferentially.

In adherence to this prevalent notion of equality, a number of talented and persuasive Aboriginal spokespeople came to the fore, on the one hand, to support but also, on the other, to challenge the Voice proposal, the latter arguing that it was discriminatory and divisive on a “racial” basis. The Referendum was defeated 60% to 40%, with only the Australian Capital Territory (where the national government is largely seated, in Canberra) rendering a majority vote in favour.

Though differing from the recent forms of cooptation of Waimiri-Atroari and identity deformation that Baines discusses, this has something in common with them. It is another example of an issue that has its *raison d'être* in an historical and continuing power imbalance but cannot simply be reduced to that. Doubtless, Indigenous interests are represented as contrary to the smooth operation of the social and political order (just as FUNAI argues that Waimiri-Atroari must transform themselves); and this is an expression of political dominance. While such instances show a (modernized but) pervasive influence of dominant people and formations on those subordinate (as do Baines' examples, more egregiously) they also show a related diversification of Indigenous responses as they find themselves within the specific, recent frames of these asymmetrical forces.

To see the impositions from an outsider's viewpoint and value system enables the identification of the oppressive, the distortion that asymmetry brings. Is an outsider's, and an advocate's viewpoint, sufficient? It seems to me that only further focus on concepts, practices and responses to power asymmetries will allow us to develop the theory of the asymmetrical forces we seek to understand.

What do the Waimiri-Atroari think and do, for example, when depicted nowadays (and lauded) by FUNAI as “resistant”? Do they, or do some, adopt or espouse this view? What are their attitudes to the circumstances in which they find themselves? What do they think of the Captains installed by FUNAI, and how do they relate to them? How do they deal with assertions of authority, and how can we understand their responses? While none of us who have worked with indigenous communities would want to deny the histories of domination, most of us understand that we need to probe the ways these are understood and acted on.

Obviously, as Indigenous people are “contacted” and “colonized” they become different from what they were in earlier circumstances. They may resent and resist. Another way in which they may become different from before is to objectify their situation in new ways (e.g., begin to think of their practices as ‘culture’, or a culture, differing from others; as valuable, or not, to themselves and others). They also become more diverse in their responses to their circumstances. In some ways, we know, they are impelled to differentiate themselves – viz. the appointment of some men as Captains who are treated differently from others, and from that position may espouse the ideas of FUNAI more than others. Differentiation of positions, values and modes of doing things is a regularly encountered outcome in indigenous communities after a certain phase of colonial engagement.



To provide another Australian example: in the 1970s and 1980s, as Australian mining interests explored and proposed to mine in remote areas at the same time that Aboriginal people were gradually gaining more rights to involvement, environmentalist groups tended to assume that Aborigines were inherently conservationist and would side with them in opposing mining. However, as these engagements developed, and benefits were on the table for Aboriginal groups, the anticipated identity of Indigenous-environmentalist positionings sometimes turned out otherwise.

In early 2004 the State of Queensland's Labor government, working from the findings of the Australian Heritage Commission's "Wild River's Project", identified nineteen of Queensland's rivers as potential Wild Rivers. In September 2005, an *Act* was passed, creating a system for the gazettal and declaration of Wild River areas and becoming the country's first legislation to specifically identify and protect allegedly near-pristine rivers and their tributaries. The region became a site of contention. Public Indigenous intellectual Noel Pearson declared that the *Act* was emblematic of the ascendancy of "Greenies", and would be "a death by a thousand cuts" for pastoralists and Indigenous Australian communities (thus making explicit a different sort of alliance of interests). Other Indigenous groups from Cape York (Pearson's home region) came to the national capital to support the *Act* (Neale 2017).

While Stephen gives a detailed history of incursions upon the Waimiri-Atroari, one wants to understand more about how they construe the situation.

Stephen also conducted research on Australian anthropology under the rubric of National Styles (see especially Baines 1993, 2012). While he recognized the diversity of anthropological research in Australia (and in particular, a concentration on south-east Asia), his focus was on indigenist anthropology. He provides an account of the history of anthropology's development in Australia, positing some comparisons and contrasts with Brazil.

He noted the persistent contrast and dichotomization of Australian Indigenous people and communities as "settled" (generally in southern parts of the continent, and coastal-dwelling like the majority of other Australians), versus "remote"; and the history of Australian anthropology's wrestling with issues of "traditionalism" versus social change, allegedly linked to this distribution; and the long-term lesser valuation of anthropological research with "urban" Aborigines and those seen as less "traditional".

The settled/remote contrast persists in Australia, but now in a changed situation, in terms of geography and identitarian politics. The majority of people who now identify as 'Indigenous' live in major cities and large regional towns, and typically have greater political sophistication than most of those living in remote communities. The remote community dwellers, materially and in terms of health, housing and other conditions, are the most obviously disadvantaged, but with lesser capacity to make this known publicly.



The current geographical distribution of people of Indigenous ancestry in Australia has become possible partly as a result of a history of shifting forms of categorization, most notably a move from the long-contested “Aborigine” (which, in the past, was often accompanied by forms of racially-based fractional identity) to “Indigenous”.

Baines (2012) exemplifies kinds of recent anthropology being written in all the comparator countries. He refers to ‘amazing commonalities’ among Brazil, Australia and Canada, and the increasing globalization and sophistication of indigenous political movements in all. Indigenous people have achieved greater inclusion in a variety of ways, and anthropologists are now bound to carry out research in indigenous communities in more accountable ways. Despite some movement towards such greater accountability, he and colleagues have also taken account of the dangers posed by recent Bolsonarist policies to Indigenous lands, people and health – though these are not matters he deals with comparatively (Barros Soares and Baines 2021).

There are some other parallels that my consideration of Stephen’s work has brought to my mind, regarding which theorization has in my view not been exhausted. Viveiros de Castro writes of the difference in (Brazilian) ethnology between the pole of indigenous people and the pole of the “national state” (1999, 120). There is no mediation between these points of view, he suggests, because a Dumontian hierarchical opposition is involved. Each pole is complete, but there remains a question of dominance. In a footnote, de Castro spells out his objection to the project of de Oliveira (without in any way wishing to minimize his significance in Brazilian anthropology), suggesting that he wished to engender a “good tradition” with its sense of the object of ethnology as “interethnic contact”, in opposition to long-standing “traditionalism”. This, over the longer term, has produced something of an opposite reaction.

For there to be “interethnic contact”, de Castro continues, there must be something in contact; and there is nothing more substantialist and naturalizing than the naïve physics of “contact” and “friction”, not much improved by the equally physical metaphor of “field” (de Castro 1999, 119). But if, as he proposes, there is no such thing as interethnic contact, it is because “não há outro modo de contar a história senão do ponto de vista de uma das partes”. (There is no other way to tell the story other than from the point of view of one of the parties).

One could, he continues, “poder-se-iam dispensar as sociedades indígenas e suas ‘interações’ com a sociedade nacional, ficando só com esta última e suas ‘construções’ das sociedades indígenas” (dismiss indigenous societies and their “interactions” with national society, leaving only the latter and its “constructions” of indigenous societies, de Castro 1999, 119). From his own point of view (and the “indigenous pole”), “*tudo é interno a ele* - inclusive a ‘sociedade envolvente’”. *Todas as relações são internas, pois uma sociedade não existe antes e fora das relações que a constituem, o que inclui suas relações com o ‘exterior’*. (...everything is internal to it – including the engaging society. All relations are internal, as a society does not exist before and outside the relations that constitute it, which includes



its relations with the 'outside', de Castro 1999, 120).

It is therefore mistaken in his view to allow the fact of domination to become that of ontological encompassment (*ibid.*). The latter, if accepted, compels the counter-invention of an "internal" and hierarchically subordinate dimension. One might say (my wording and suggestion, probably different from what de Castro would say) that domination does not govern the mode of internalization, or living out, of encroachments and influences; rather, any such process is subject to a range of forces. But nor would I argue, as some works in an avowedly ontological vein may do, that the result is reproduction in terms of an exclusively indigenous ontology, nor that the outcome is necessarily completely aligned and continuous with indigenous values. In addition, I would also question the holism which de Castro's choice of the word "society" seems to imply here.

In his exposition (much lengthier than I can review here), de Castro proposes differences in construing the "object of ethnology" that derive from differing conceptualizations of these issues. This does not only apply in Brazilian anthropology, where it seems to me that Stephen's work with the Waimiri-Atroari, now of some years ago, fell squarely within the rubric of the overwhelming domination of interethnic contact.

Baines' work remains a solidly historical account of domination, and of relations of Waimiri-Atroari to FUNAI during his research, but it also raises questions. The same problematics of the nature of encroachment, and construals of dimensions of continuity and disruption, occur in the anthropologies of colonized indigenous peoples in other parts of the world, including Australia. This is a topic which seems to inform different approaches, one might even say cleavages, in Brazilian ethnology. It has also done so in Australianist work in ways that would easily constitute a worthwhile dimension of comparative scrutiny.



About the author

Francesca Merlan was a professor of anthropology in the School of Archaeology and Anthropology, Australian National University, from 1995 to 2021; she is now Emerita. She has conducted field research since the latter 1970s in northern Australia, the 1980s in Papua New Guinea with Alan Rumsey, and continues in both regions; and in the 1990s in Europe (Germany). She has long been interested in critical, empirically accountable theorization and description of social and cultural change. Her book of 2018 attempts to describe and theorize the long-term trajectory of indigenous-nonindigenous difference in Australia; she is interested in this topic comparatively, especially in the (Anglo) settler colonies but also, contrastively, beyond them. She is qualified in linguistics and anthropology, and continues endangered language documentation in the Katherine region of the Northern Territory of Australia and research in Papua New Guinea.

Email: Francesca.Merlan@anu.edu.au

Author's Contribution

Francesca Merlan is responsible for the integral conception and writing of this comment, as well as for raising the funds that enabled the research reported on to be carried out.

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