

# IS A PERIPHERAL AGENDA FOR ANTHROPOLOGY POSSIBLE? SOME PROPOSALS FROM THE AMAZON

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## ABSTRACT

This paper aims to propose an epistemopolitical agenda for Anthropology from the Amazon, understood here as a peripheral, Latin American, original, and radical space. In this sense, we seek to defend the idea that the renovation, expansion, and consolidation of Brazilian social sciences necessarily starts from the peripheral institutions, especially in a context of sharpening authoritarian discourses and unrestricted adherence, still, to internal colonialism - epistemic, inclusive.

**Keywords:** Epistemopolitics, Amazonia, Periphery.

### ¿ES POSIBLE UNA AGENDA PERIFÉRICA PARA LA ANTROPOLOGÍA? ALGUNAS PROPUESTAS DESDE LA AMAZONÍA

#### RESUMEN

Este artículo tiene como objetivo proponer una agenda epistemopolítica para la Antropología desde la Amazonía, entendida aquí como un espacio periférico, latinoamericano, original y radical. En este sentido, buscamos defender la idea de que la renovación, expansión y consolidación de las ciencias sociales brasileñas comienza necesariamente en las instituciones periféricas, especialmente en un contexto de agudización de los discursos autoritarios y la adhesión sin restricciones aún al colonialismo interno -epistémico, inclusivo.

**Palabras clave:** Epistemopolítica, Amazonía, Periferia.

### É POSSÍVEL UMA AGENDA PERIFÉRICA PARA A ANTROPOLOGIA? ALGUNAS PROPOSTAS DA AMAZÔNIA

#### RESUMO

Este texto pretende propor uma agenda epistemopolítica para a Antropologia desde a Amazônia, entendida aqui como espaço periférico, latino-americano, original e radical. Nesse sentido, busca-se defender a ideia de que a renovação, ampliação e consolidação das ciências sociais brasileiras parte, necessariamente, das instituições periféricas, em especial em um contexto de acirramento de discursos autoritários e da adesão irrestrita, ainda, ao colonialismo interno – epistêmico, inclusive.

**Palavras-chave:** Epistemopolítica, Amazônia, Periferia.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

A preliminary note about this text is essential. The following pages are the result of intense discussions within the scope of the Disruptive and Undisciplined Anthropologies Working Group (Southern Anthropologies Network)<sup>1</sup> of the Latin American Association of Anthropology over the past years. The proposals below have the character of an agenda gestated from internal debates but also in events such as the last Brazilian meetings of anthropology and the Equatorial Meeting of Anthropology, among others. Thus, we share some of our concerns within this collective. That said, it is essential to note that this text is not a global synthesis of everything that is gestated there, so I assume responsibility for any failures or omissions in writing.

In addition, some of the issues outlined here are precisely for recording and gradual refinement. For reasons raised below, whoever occupies spaces in institutions or research centers in the peripheries is not always represented in mainstream academic forums (Palermo 2017, Wallerstein 1996). There are historical, sociological, and economic reasons behind the low production indicators of these research loci. These issues need to be addressed head-on if we want Brazilian social sciences to advance autonomously (Bemerguy 2019). More than a possible “monogrel complex”, as Brazilians usually say, these peripheries lend epistemic *and* political dynamism

to the concerns of social scientists in the country. It is essential to clarify that “epistemic and political” are seen here as inseparable parts of the dynamics of knowledge/power, hence the term “epistemopolitical” (Fernandes 2016) later on. The idea is that this text is a first step in formulating collaboration networks in the peripheries of the Brazilian academy and its integration with other Latin American centers.

The concerns about these interstices of the world system as privileged spaces of resistance and knowledge creation date back to Anzaldúa, Cesaire, and Fanon and allow us to rediscover the connections between historically subaltern knowledge and anthropological praxis. In this moment of re-democratization of Brazil and intensification of struggles against fascism in the country, these connections, renewals, and boldness may be more necessary than ever - especially in the peripheries, where these pressures are more strongly felt in daily life.

Thus, the aim of this text is much more to raise concerns and present proposals than to close questions on the topics addressed here. It is a starting point and should be read as such.

## 2. ADAGIO

There are few forums for us, social science producers in Latin American Amazon, to exchange ideas. Almost always, when we meet, it is at events regulated by academic-scientific institutions locat-

<sup>1</sup> Antropologías disidentes e indisciplinadas (Red de Antropologías del Sur).

ed politically, epistemologically, and sociologically in the country's major centers (Almeida 2019). Those of us who produce anthropologies in these spaces have our national directions – in the case of Brazilian knowledge geopolitics, this “direction” is usually located at the Tropic of Capricorn.

In general, we don't have time to talk. Social scientists in peripheral institutions need to juggle classes, guidance, and research with countless administrative tasks and opinions on various problems. Ironically, our jobs hinder our work in institutions that often were born with a reduced technical staff and in disrepair. Here comes the first illusion: doing social sciences here means not having secretaries and technicians in the departments to receive processes, attend to students, update us on events and news at council meetings, or make simple requests for air conditioning maintenance in a classroom or a projector for a class. We eat our cake and have it, too, in a way and at an intensity that only we understand. This does not mean that colleagues down there do not go through this, of course, but the naturalization of scarcity is structural in our daily lives at a level beyond the “precarious” (cf. Silva 2011).

The lack of time for conversation is combined with another issue: lack of funding. Local research institutions lack financing for various rea-

sons: they do not have money, they are filled with local politicians who are not particularly interested in the humanities, or they have limited resources available, mainly for the natural sciences or for funding programs more closely related to the “market”. As for national funding programs, the same issues arise: they are often targeted, the evaluation criteria are not always transparent, and the committees involved are focused on maintaining spaces, money, and privilege in the usual places. A good exercise in the sociology of science is, for example, to see from which regions the directors of areas and members of CNPq<sup>2</sup> and Capes<sup>3</sup> committees, or even our representative entities, come. There is no regional diversity, and when there is, it is always the same people talking about a generic Amazon as if they knew everything that is done, thought, and produced in such a heterogeneous region. Ultimately, it is about maintaining one's own space or welcoming one's networks to these power structures.

Furthermore, when it comes to national funding programs, another point emerges. Since many of the reviews come from colleagues located in “Capricornian” institutions, the idea is to keep as many resources available there as possible, reducing the impact of what we produce, saying that we do not supervise enough, our programs do not

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<sup>2</sup> National Council for Scientific and Technological Development.

<sup>3</sup> Coordination for the Improvement of Higher Education.

have good enough *Qualis* ratings<sup>4</sup>, our research has only local effect, or our projects cannot even be considered science - expressions taken directly from reviews received by colleagues from the region. Our scientific journals are not good enough, our events have no impact, and our networks do not extend beyond the regional level. The same people who, in academia, do not publicly express concern about changing this structure are the same people who pressure us to sign yet another manifesto or statement of protest when changes arise that affect their distribution of scholarships or institutional evaluation criteria.

Our travel expenses for national and international events are exorbitant; we are underrepresented; urgent issues for our professors such as employment, mandatory teaching of sociology in high school, various persecutions of humanities professionals in inhospitable areas none of these causes the same kind of commotion as taking away a scholarship from a major program, or not renewing something that until yesterday we did not even know existed.

### 3. ALLEGRO

From here, I will develop the central argument of this text: peripheries function as laboratories for modernity<sup>5</sup>.

This sentence has several possible interpretations, depending on the context we write. Mine, here, is this: if the central academy of Brazil (and this can be generalized in terms of Latin America and the United States) looked outside its immediate networks and realized what was happening in small and peripheral institutions, they would see the size of the crisis that would come in recent years (Frigotto 2021).

And here comes my hypothesis in this text:

*Brazilian social sciences' renewal, expansion, and consolidation necessarily stem from peripheral institutions.*

What does this mean? Essentially, the strengthening of networks of professionals (I am not just talking about researchers or academics, but professionals, including Funai, Iphan, Incra, Public Ministry, teachers in primary education etc.); more excellent distribution of resources; invitations to compose dossiers, anthologies, events; specific calls for proposals; insertion into committees; etc. can lead, but not be limited to (1) the renewal of paradigms in Brazilian social sciences, involving more excellent dialogue with subaltern, Latin American, peripheral, and diverse knowledge historically objectified by the discipline itself; (2) a critical counterpoint to the obscurantist, conservative, and anti-academic

4 To understand what *Qualis* is, cf. Jaffé (2020). By the way, the article is an excellent critical source on the current evaluation system and its impacts on Brazilian science.

5 The idea is not mine, but was developed by Ann Stoler a few years ago (Stoler 2001), in dialogue with the historian Gwendolyn Wright.

discourse that now, only now, also oppresses the Olympians; (3) a more realistic perception of the impacts of this obscurantism in Brazil's heartland ineffectively confront it. How is this possible? Articulating and monitoring these records with the state and federal public ministries, police forces, and international human rights organizations is an alternative.

This is not just about "increasing internal diversity" of a given association, event, or committee. Pastors have been in charge of politics in these regions for a long time; agribusiness is not pop, gender, and sexuality have been forbidden in the classroom for years, and so on. We tried to warn in the texts that were not read, in the lectures that were not attended, and in the conversations we had at events where you were not present because you were precise and concerned, among other things, with maintaining the status quo. Here is part of the solution proposal, which is necessarily peripheral and restructuring.

#### 4. PRESTO

But after all, what does it mean to do social sciences, particularly anthropology, on these margins? Let us be proactive from here on.

For those who, like me, were educated in academic courses in the 1990s and early 2000s, we remember well what was said about the "Ethnology Brazilian Style": Brazilians are close to the then-called "objects of research", with whom there is a political commitment due to the physical proxim-

ity and the possibility of more constant back-and-forth trips from the field (cf. Ramos 1990)

Funny how, in retrospect, we did not see the deception there, amid this detached view of what the role of Anthropology is in such a diverse, unequal country with such a fragile democracy like ours. I understand that this perspective can be extended to other Latin American and *third-world* contexts (I use this term with great pride, aware of the euphemisms coming from the metropolises, such as "developing countries" or "from the South").

First problem: there is not *one* Brazilian Anthropology. Instead, there are hegemonic groups with greater visibility for historical, structural, sociological, or more mundane reasons (such as being advised by a particular person or being friends with someone). We recount the history of "Brazilian anthropology" as if it were born on the Tropic of Capricorn in the 1930s and had no involvement with scientific racism or eugenics in the 19th century or early 20th century, for example. "It all happens as if" was a unique, heroic trajectory without any place for self-criticism.

As has been said, peripheral people have a very different daily life from those in the significant Capricornian centers: we have to deal with radical conservatisms in our daily lives, including within academia. Obscurantism is our everyday life, not an alternative, and there is no escape from it. We in the periphery are laboratories of ultramodernity and subject to all kinds of inter-

nal colonialism, including epistemology. We are also reminded daily of the risks of being colonizers, given that the “object” of others here on the fringes of the “world system” are students, colleagues, neighbors, and friends.

Does this mean that our only alternative is to “cancel” Anthropology, engaging in yet another postmodern critique? Replace the social sciences with scorched earth? Nothing? The idea is precisely the opposite: diverse and adverse anthropology, not in the sense of simply being able to coexist with these border spaces but, in a radical way, breaking with the narrative that there is “one” Anthropology, “one” style of Anthropology, a “proximity” to the “native”. It is a matter of expanding the very concept of Anthropology to understand these anthropologies – without calling them “knowledge”, “cosmologies”, or even “peripheral”<sup>6</sup>.

It is not just an epistemological movement – which, incidentally, exists – but an epistemopolitical turn. I have recently called this “candiru anthropology”.

Let me explain.

In these Amazonian parts, we are not afraid of alligators or jaguars. They are beautiful animals and look good in a photo taken while safely cruising on a boat in a well-protected tourist itinerary: with a guide, sunscreen, and insect repellent. On the contrary, what we fear is what we cannot see. It is that scorpion or armadillo spider in our

shoe, the mosquito that transmits malaria (*carapanã*), one or another entity of the forest – like the *mappinguari*, whose smell any backwoodsman can discern from afar – or the *Vandellia cirrhosa*, a small fish of the catfish order that enters through the urethra or anus during river baths and gradually devours you from the inside: the candiru.

What I propose are candiru anthropologies. Something small, voracious, virtually invisible but capable of causing damage. Each region has its metaphorical candirus, but the idea is always the same: that of a covert, cannibalistic, radical epistemopolitical action with the power to devour the guts of an educational system focused on itself, on maintaining the *status quo* of two dozen people and willing to face enemies with voracity. The piranha, for example, attacks those already bleeding: the candiru does not. Any Amazonian knows how difficult it is to remove a candiru once it enters one of these places.

It is time to set aside well-behaved, sweet-smelling Anthropology, dressed in cocktail attire for increasingly expensive academic events, with inaccessible language and lukewarm and neutral notes thrown onto social media that nobody reads. Candiru anthropology is a club, is technobrega, is cachaça. It is time to stop pretending that we are in Paris, that our practices take place in the ether, and that authoritarianism ceases to exist by itself. Our existence depends on anthropologies that understand themselves as a

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Mignolo (2020).

borderland, *caboclo*, *sertanejo*, black, without Wi-Fi, air conditioning, treated sewage, or coverage at the bus stop. It is time to stop exoticizing the public hospital line, the lack of electricity, and the housekeeper's child. Without candiru, carapanãs, and mappinguaris anthropologies, we will continue to emulate knowledge and practices that served Anthropology well in colonial contexts and that serve the so-called "Brazilian Anthropology" with which, let us agree, no one identifies.

How does this work in practice? It is time to build our networks, organize our events, and use and abuse the instruments that colonialism lent us, making scarcity materially irrelevant, using it epistemically. We have to cite each other more, connect more, and call each other more. Yes, we have to expose the logic of an exclusionary academic system and speak about it in specific forums where we can articulate ourselves. It is also a matter of thinking about other languages: videos, podcasts, and manifestos on specific channels where we can give visibility to this kind of anguish (calling this "reflection" alone is cynical).

How many texts produced in the North or Northeast, for example, appeared in your last course bibliography? We must support each other more, invite our classes to joint sessions, invite colleagues from outside academia to converse, and stop thinking only about Lattes, the numerous bureaucratic tasks we accumulate, the lack of money, or the discouragement, the persecution.

It is not scarcity that unites us. The periphery is everything but scorched land. This is how we were taught, by colonialism, to see our political-social-epistemic reality.

## 5. LIGHTS AT THE END OF THE TUNNEL

For those who didn't have the patience to read the pages written so far, here are some ideas for an agenda so that we can act together from these peripheral spaces that occupy us.

Firstly, let's face reality, it's time to ally with people from the peripheries and talk to those in the North, Midwest, and Northeast, not just those blessed with central academia.

Secondly, there needs to be a more excellent dialogue about and with Latin America. We need to learn about and discuss Peruvian, Venezuelan, Colombian, and Bolivian sociology... building bridges between our diversities and, more importantly, recognizing ourselves in Latin American identity. Nothing is more awkward than those who produce amidst growing fascism, vulgar conservatism, everyday violence, and obscurantism and act as if they were sipping wine on the banks of Siena, discussing the best translation of James Joyce's *Ulysses*. The purpose here is precisely to account for an epistemopolitical concern typical of the periphery: is there the possibility of a Candiru social science? Social science is, first and foremost, socially informed and politically engaged in and through practice. What does this imply?



By “epistemopolitical”, I propose something that is not only an intellectual posture but also/ political primarily. Academia teaches us that scientific objectivity is a neutral, distancing, and analytical posture, unlike a political or socially engaged stance. An epistemopolitical thought proposes dealing with thought as action (and vice versa), mixing and mingling subjectivity, engagement, reflection, and commitment: a critical and reactive thinking-acting, as if there were no separation between subject/object, no separation between acting/thinking. It is not just a matter of saying that thought and action are intertwined, but something more radical, from which we take part in the reality that crosses us in a creative and transformative posture in all senses. I think that from the peripheries – such as the case of the Amazon, but not limited to us – an epistemopolitical stance of social scientists implies not only combating racism, fascism, obscurantism, conservatism, and *status quo* but also in their amplification and subversion from the bottom up and inside out.

Thirdly, we need to take ourselves more seriously. We must stop thinking that our production only has a local impact, regardless of what reviewers from foundations, journals, and funding agencies say. Put bluntly; it’s; it’s thought that we can only provide experiences to be analyzed by the central academia and transform them into theory, which implies redefining the notion of theory and the Amazon in the terms proposed above. It’s time to embrace third-worldism and to assume

ourselves as deep Latin America (Bonfil Batalla 2019), understanding theorizing as a political act, not detached from reality but as a counterpoint to the well-behaved and passive rhetoric embraced by the academia located on the central institutions.

As decolonial thinkers suggest, this does not mean throwing away this knowledge. Still, rather a movement to look to the side (Mignolo 2020) to start citing each other more, talking more, integrating more in discipline programs, events, seminars etc.

In other words, it is time to compile dossiers in partnership, support our journals and events, and engage in dialogues on our terms. This means (1) moving beyond what the academy proposes, thinking about podcasts, videos, collective and artistic creations – and yes, incorporating these new languages as our sources. Just because something is not published in a high-ranking *Qualis* journal does not mean it should be discarded. Many talented individuals are engaging in social struggle and decolonizing academia on *Twitter*, *YouTube*, *Instagram*, *TikTok*, and beyond. (2) It also means stepping outside of academia itself. Just because someone lacks a degree or a Ph.D. (or does not write in English, French, or Portuguese following the standard norm) does not mean their knowledge should be simply relegated to the background.

The only way to deal with our daily scarcity is to create and reinforce alliances and to transform this lack of everything in the face of an apocalyptic scenario into a profusion of ideas to be echoed in these peripheral and disruptive spaces.

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