

Candiru anthropologies: notes for epitesmo-political strategies from the peripheries



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Opinion

Something is disturbing to those who do Anthropology at the margins in Brazil - and possibly in peripheral contexts in Latin America - and beyond. Those who, like me, were educated in academic courses during the 1990s and early 2000s, remember well what my professors said back then about the “Brazilian style of anthropology”: we, Brazilians, are close to the so-called “research objects”, with which we have a political commitment through physical proximity and the possibility of more constant coming and going from the field. We would have developed our ethnographic tradition, “committed” and “engaged”. I know that this self-image is not restricted to Brazilian Anthropology, but also many other countries of the continent. We like to think that our way of doing anthropology is not colonized, with English or French accents, and is, in many ways, liberating for the social groups with whom we write. Really?

It’s funny how, in retrospect, we didn’t see the ludicrousness there, in such a detached vision of what is, in fact, the role of Anthropology in a country as diverse, unequal and with a democracy such as fragile as ours. By the way, I understand that this perspective can be extended to other Latin-American and third world contexts (I use this expression here with great pride, aware of the euphemisms coming from the metropolis, such as “developing countries” or “southern countries”).

First problem: there is neither a Brazilian Anthropology nor a Latin American, or non-hegemonic Anthropology.

There are, in fact, hegemonic groups - usually located in large, more centrally and economically developed regions - which fight for ego, power and visibility spaces, scholarships, and any of the meager resources to which we have access in peripheral Universities. Besides, we are not close to the “objects” (I will return to the question of objects later): on the contrary. A trip by plane and then a rented car to the village is not proximity, and we in anthropology should be aware of this: distance and

distancing are as different as proximity and familiarity. This thinking is metropolitan in many ways: it assumes that a shorter physical distance means access - symbolic, political, and epistemic - to completely different social realities. Being close does not necessarily imply sharing experiences and/or challenges.

We, peripheral people, have a daily life very different from that of the big centers: we have to deal with radical conservatism in our daily lives, even within the academy. Obscurantism is our daily life, not an alternative, and there is no escape from it. We, from the periphery, are laboratories of ultra-modernity and submitted to all kinds of internal colonialism, including epistemological. We are reminded, also daily, of the risks of being, ourselves, colonizers, since the “object” of the others are, here on the bangs of the “world-system”: students, students, colleagues, neighbors, and friends. Our culture, cuisine, temporality, smells, tastes, and ethical and aesthetic sense are like “voodoo for tourists”, or, *mutatis mutandis*, for metropolitan anthropologists.

Does this mean that our only alternative is to “cancel” Anthropology, engaging in yet another of the critiques that point to supposed places of speech and legitimacy as has been done - well or badly, it matters little - for many years now, since the human sciences have been swept by the postmodern wave? In the place of the Social Sciences, the wasteland? The nothingness?

The idea is, precisely, the opposite: diverse and adverse anthropology, not in the sense of being able to simply coexist with these border spaces, but, radically, breaking with the narrative that there is “one” Anthropology, “one” style of Anthropology, a “proximity” to the “native”. It is a matter of broadening the very concept of Anthropology for the understanding of these anthropologies - without calling them “pieces of knowledge” or “cosmologies”.

It is not just an epistemological movement - which, by the way, exists - but an epistemo-political turn. I have been calling this, recently, “candiru anthropology”.

Let me explain.

We, in these Amazonian parts, are not afraid of caimans or jaguars. They are beautiful animals, they look good on a picture taken while we are walking safely on a boat or on a well-protected tourist itinerary: with a guide, sunscreen, and repellent. What we fear are, on the contrary, what we don't see. It's that scorpion or spider inside our shoes, the mosquito that transmits malaria (called carapanan), one or another entity of the forest - like the mapinguari, whose smell any woodsman discerns from afar - or the *Vandellia cirrhosa*, a small fish of the catfish order that enters through the urethra or anus while bathing in rivers and gradually devours you from the inside. Yes, it exists: it is called a candiru. It is not just an epistemological movement - which, by the way, exists - but an epistemo-political turn: a "candiru anthropology".

What I propose are candiru anthropologies. Something small, voracious, virtually invisible but capable of doing damage. Each region has its metaphorical candirus, but the idea is always the same: an invisible, cannibal (not anthropophagic, but really cannibal), radical epistemo-political action with the power to devour the viscera of an academic system turned in on itself, for the maintenance of the status quo of two dozen people, and willing to face enemies with voracity. The piranha, for example, attacks those who are 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 leave behind the well-behaved, smelly anthropology, with cocktail clothes from academic events (increasingly expensive, by the way), with an inaccessible language, of lukewarm and neutral notes posted on social networks that nobody reads. Of the big texts and the notes of repudiation. 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. It is time to stop pretending that there are no urgent demands and increasingly urgent social, environmental, cultural, and economic agendas in the third world. While fascism and repression increase in our countries and human rights are undermined, we contemplate from afar. Enough is enough.

Our existence depends on anthropologies that understand themselves as borderline, queer, black, without wi-fi, air conditioning, basic sanitation, or bus stops with roofs. Time to stop exoticizing the hospital line, the lack of electricity, the housekeeper's son. Without Candirus, Carapanan, Mapinguari anthropologies, we will continue emulating knowledge and practices that served well Anthropology in colonial contexts and that serve well the so-called "Brazilian", "Mexican", "Argentinean"(...) Anthropology with which, we must admit, nobody really identifies.



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