

## STEREOTYPES AND THE CHANGING IMAGE OF ANTHROPOLOGY IN BRAZIL

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This workshop<sup>2</sup> was organized under the assumption that anthropology is going through a problem with its “public image.” I believe that, to a lesser or greater degree, anthropology has often had a problem with its public image. Our research subjects and the anthropological perspective commonly destabilize the naturalization of the social worlds where anthropologists live. Therefore, I think the “public image” of anthropology needs to be seen as a contentious issue, one that is located within a realm of conflictive representations on academic work, its impacts and functions. On the one hand, anthropologists try to impart certain attributes to their image since the opinions people they study, state, intellectual and political elites have of anthropology may impact anthropological research and practices as well as the academic reproduction of the discipline. Here the role of associations and academic leaders is primordial. On the other hand, other people surely have their perception of what anthropology is all about and I suspect that the discipline is still caught in what Michel-Rolph Trouillot (1991) has called the “savage slot.”

Whatever it may be, anthropologists and anthropologies are more often than not associated with exoticism, especially by the media, the great contemporary opinion maker. Exoticism, a rather exotic creature in itself, is a master discourse that creates stereotypes and taxonomies about others. Its role is quickly changing in a globalized world dominated by multicultural and identity politics. This change, I believe, is a motor underneath the

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transformations of the public image of anthropology worldwide, more so in academic environments with a strong presence of disciplines or theoretical orientations, such as cultural studies and postcolonialism, that struggle with anthropology to control the meaning of “culture” in social, political and economic life. All of what I said before varies, of course, according to the contexts where anthropology is practiced. For instance, the sense of crisis that has become rather common among practitioners located in metropolitan centers is not found elsewhere. It certainly is not found in Brazil.

Brazilian anthropology is often seen by anthropologists of other nationalities as an example of an anthropology that has a positive public image given its involvement with relevant political issues in the country. There are always good reasons for a set of practices to be associated with positive or negative public images. Such reasons relate to sociological and historical processes that include the making of state apparatuses as well as nation-building. In our case, we also need to include the proactive role of the academic and political leadership of Brazilian anthropologists in the past fifty years, since the founding of the Brazilian Association of Anthropology in 1955. But it is equally important to consider the broader scenario in which Brazilian anthropologists are immersed. The prevailing social representations, ideologies and utopias on Brazil are deeply traversed by a major discursive matrix I call tropicalism (Ribeiro, 2004). The efficacy of tropicalism is felt both by Brazilians and foreigners and impinges upon an entity called “Brazilian identity.” Tropicalism is to “Brazil” as Orientalism (Said, 1994) is to the “Orient.” In short, it is a mirror, historically constructed by foreigners and Brazilians, about a paradisiacal land that is never cold, where people are sensual, always happy and future oriented. Legend goes that such a place is also the fortunate result of a mix of three races, Whites, Indians and Africans (Da Matta, 1982). While this universe is more complicated than what my drastic summary suggests -- for instance, in a world dominated by the ideology/utopia of development we need to mention the many representations about social injustice and poverty -- it is a universe both the Brazilian “public opinion” and anthropologists share to a lesser or greater extent.

Although there is a growing number of Brazilian anthropologists who do their fieldwork abroad, especially in Africa and in Latin America, most anthropologists in Brazil do research on a vast array of subjects that pertain to the fabrics of the social life of the Brazilian nation-state. I will not make justice here to the diversity and complexity of the Brazilian anthropological

production and the public issues it addresses. However, there are two main issues that inform what most Brazilians think about anthropology. Both are related to the myth of racial democracy, the hegemonic interethnic ideology in Brazil and a major force underneath tropicalism. They are the Indian and African issues. These political issues regard the role that Indians and Afro-descendants had in the past and currently have in processes of nation-building.

To be true, the prevailing stereotype is that anthropologists are specialists on Indians, in spite of the fact that colleagues who study native populations are themselves a minority within the Brazilian anthropological milieu. This “expert knowledge” gives them a lot of visibility and has been a major source of the authority of the Brazilian Anthropological Association, for instance. To understand the dominant facet of the “public image” of the Brazilian anthropology, we need to consider that although Indians are a tiny minority and the most vulnerable people in Brazil, they are seen as one of the three main contributors, together with “Whites” and “Africans”, to the making of the Brazilian nation and culture. Alcida Ramos (1998) used the term “indigenism” to describe the ideological and political constructions surrounding native groups in Brazil and their role in nation-building. Indians are also seen as a problem. They are portrayed, especially in the Amazon, as owners of huge tracts of land that hinder the development of the country. When Indian lands are located in border areas they are usually seen as a “national security problem.” Therefore, to be able to count on “specialists” on Indians is an asset the state and the media can use whenever they deem necessary. Anthropologists are good to explain why Brazilians are the way they are. They are also good to explain why the Indians, the “internal Brazilian other” (Peirano, 1999), behave the way they do.

The relationships between so called “Whites” and “Afro-Brazilians” comprise the second issue, a rather visible one in the past few years given the fact that “affirmative action” has become a political ideology of the Brazilian black movement. Anthropologists got engaged in this ongoing political struggle with two different positions (see Ribeiro, 2006). On the one hand, there are those who view the introduction of quotas for Afro-descendants in the Brazilian university system as an import from the U.S. that will generate new types of racial conflicts. They do not deny the existence of racism in Brazil but fear that the engendering of state regulations may harden the ethnic frontier between “Blacks and Whites” with unexpected effects

in a country largely made up by mestizos. On the other hand, there are those who think that affirmative action is a mechanism that will help to diminish the huge inequalities between “Whites” and “Afro-Brazilians”. They argue that the current vulnerability of Afro-descendants is a result of the historical inaction of the Brazilian state and that only “focused policies” can remediate the existing social injustices.

These conflictive positions have often been vehiculated in the media, in newspapers, on the radio and TV, in major news shows that reach a wide audience. Anthropologists who are leading figures of these opposing camps organized lists signed by well-known scholars, artists, politicians and intellectuals to lobby the National Congress. In a public audience in Congress, in August 3, 2006, these positions were confronted. The audience was broadcasted to the whole country and a report was shown in Brazil’s most important news program with an estimated audience of 40 million people.

The idea of a new form of “cultural imperialism” aimed at destroying a supposedly racially blind Brazilian society has prompted hot debates within and outside Brazil. Foreign social scientists, such as Pierre Bourdieu and Loic Wacquant (2002), for instance, used the Brazilian example to argue that North-American ideologies were being disseminated according to the interests of the Empire, with the help of foundations and other forms of aid. Michael Hanchard (2002), a North-American anthropologist who joined the debate, replied that Bourdieu and Wacquant were unaware of the Black Movement’s transnational character.

Apparently, the idea that racial relations are different in Brazil is a resilient notion that captures the political, sociological and anthropological imagination of Brazilian and foreign intellectuals. It is too early to assess the impact of the changing ethnic relations over Brazilian anthropology’s public image and role. It is interesting to note, though, that while the public image of anthropology remains more unified when the issues are Indian affairs, it is increasingly fractured when Afro-Brazilians enter the scene. This is no surprise. It surely reflects the fact that Indians are a small ethnic segment of the Brazilian nation, a segment that is often idealized and envisioned through the lenses of tropicalism that equate them with the flamboyant natural landscapes of Amazonia. It is no coincidence that the closer an Indian group is located to “White” settlements the more they are the object of prejudice and violence. The picture radically changes when we

consider the participation of the Black population in the nation. Afro-descendants are part of daily life interactions in Brazil. They are the most common target of Brazilian racism, a subject that is always difficult in a country dominated by the myth of racial democracy.

Besides the changing positions of Blacks and Indians in the Brazilian imagined national community, there are other forces that may impact Brazilian anthropology as well. They revolve around the entry of anthropologists and of the Brazilian Anthropological Association in different power fields. I will make brief comments on such forces and trends.

The Brazilian Association of Anthropology (ABA) is a major player regarding the public image of anthropology in that country. It has often been invited to express the point of view of anthropologists about different issues, especially ethnic ones, in several political and media forums. For instance, in the years before the 1988 Constitution, the Association played a critical role in elaborating constitutional precepts that guide the relationships between indigenous peoples and the Brazilian nation-state. In fact, the Brazilian state has had long-standing relationships with Brazilian anthropologists, either via ABA or by making use of their expertise in such state apparatuses as the National Indian Foundation, the Attorney General's office and, more recently, the department of former run-away slave lands, Quilombos, of the Land Reform Ministry.

The preferred self-image of Brazilian anthropologists is one of professionals who struggle for human rights and defend minorities. But with the routinization of the relationships between anthropology and institutions of power, demands on anthropologists also increased and diversified, creating new situations. Brazilian anthropologists are used to writing reports that are central pieces in processes of demarcation of Indian lands or in conflicts involving ethnic territories. These reports have been usually demanded by governmental agencies or judges. But there are recent cases in which anthropologists have worked defending farmers' interests against Indian rights. It is hard to say whether this is the beginning of a process that will bring new tensions and conflicts for the Brazilian anthropological community. This is surely related to other important sources of differentiation such as the increase in numbers of graduates in anthropology alongside with the dearth of academic jobs.

At this point, we can state that the public image of Brazilian anthropologists is split into at least two halves. The more tradi-

tional one relates to the image of the university professor and public intellectual, a rather important persona in the Brazilian public space. The other one relates to the image of a professional engaged in sociocultural, environmental, ethnic and land conflicts as an expert who writes reports in his or her capacity as a state official, a member of a NGO or a private consultant.

How will the image of Brazilian anthropologists change? A stronger presence of the Black and Indian movements struggling for their rights in several public spheres will certainly impact the ideological matrix of tropicalism. Afro-descendants and Indians will less and less comply with the stereotypes that inform the discourses on their participation in nation-building. Since Brazilian anthropologists have for quite sometime avoided the role of brokers in ethnic conflicts and have preferred the role of allies, they will certainly deepen the political understanding that Indians and Blacks are better represented when they speak with their own voices. A possible outcome of this situation may be a further differentiation between those who act in the academic world and those who are engaged in extra-university activities. In any case, I hope that differentiation and specialization do not congeal in a retreat from the political scene. The bypassing of this situation is in the hands of the leadership of our profession in Brazil.

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