

A MIDWINTER AFTERNOON'S DREAM THE UTOPIA OF A COSMOPOLITAN ANTHROPOLOGY

Alcida Ramos

A Midsummer Night's Dream is a comedy by William Shakespeare. It portrays the events surrounding the marriage of the Duke of Athens, Theseus, and the *Queen of the Amazons*, Hippolyta. These include the adventures of four young Athenian lovers and a group of amateur actors, who are manipulated by the fairies who inhabit *the forest in which most of the play is set*. (From Wikipedia, March 15, 2011).

Prelude

The theme of the anthropological universe divided into different zones of power seems to grow to gigantic proportions when regarded from the center. The Center-versus-Periphery dichotomy takes on bright primary colors when observed against the white and apparently frozen landscape of the Metropolis. What follows is a brief exercise in fantasizing about what that landscape might be if the power game was different.¹ Creating a fiction of academic democracy, like in a caricature, can help us highlight the most salient features of this problematic with no claim to realism.

1 This short essay has the shape of a fable, a mythical narrative, or, more soberly, a utopia. It came to me unexpectedly on a clear, freezing day of February in the Midwest of the United States during my 2005 sojourn at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. This may be why it seems somewhat volatile, fanciful, perhaps unreal without, however, losing its analytical commitment and intellectual seriousness. Shakespeare's play of a dream involving the mythical Amazonas enacted in the forest – the Amazon? – was an obvious inspiration. The paper was presented at the Round Table "Antropologias Mundiais" organized by Susana Narotzky and Gustavo Lins Ribeiro for the First Congress of Latin American Anthropology, Rosario, Argentina, 2005.

Utopias are ‘good to dream’. Their horizons, although unreachable – and perhaps for this very reason – bring dynamism and, most importantly, doubts about the academic canons and *topoi* that are imposed upon us by political inertia rather than intellectual persuasion. It goes without saying that the anthropological hegemony that so disturbs us, especially if we are beyond the Metropolitan pale, is not an isolated product but the reflection of a much wider and deeper phenomenon, namely, the global division of labor and its attendant unequal exchange between peoples and nations. Why then not dream of what might be in another political-historical dimension? Why not emulate the teachings contained in ethnic wisdom about diversity and how to live with it? Why, for once, don’t we let ourselves be guided by indigenous experience, when our own explanatory devices are painfully inadequate to grapple with present-day conditions, when agonistic feelings impregnate our professional discourses and are pushing us into a blind alley?

Utopia

Once upon a time, there was a utopia named *Cosmanthropolis*,² a word certainly as unexpected as its concept. In designing Cosmanthropolis, its founding fathers sought inspiration in the wise multilingual inhabitants of the Vaupés river valley in Northwest Amazon. These people have a rule of language exogamy according to which speakers of many different languages live in the same communal house under the leadership of its headman. Theirs is a multiple voiced community, a kind of organized and organic Babel. All members share idioms, ideas, solutions, and proposals while at the same time keeping their identity and local color that are preserved as symbolic capital for the community’s benefit.

Following this model, Cosmanthropolis prospered and became the most lively and creative thinking community in the social sciences landscape. Publications abounded for an audience of writers and readers without frontiers. Far from imitating the alienating assembly line of western industry, seminars took as long as it was necessary for all participants to fully express their ideas

2 I am inspired by the important work by Gustavo Lins Ribeiro (2005. See also Ribeiro and Escobar 2006). In his laudable effort of renovation, Ribeiro argues for the creation of a *cosmopolitical* space that would contemplate a true world anthropology in which national anthropologies would have equal opportunities of expression and influence.

and have them properly discussed. Thus, ideas flowed unfettered by time or space constraints. Research funding was not limited to reinforcing dominant trends, but mostly awarded bold intellectual experimentation, wherever it came from. As a rule, text editors fined authors who undeservedly pretended their ideas were original and those who omitted due and just credit to colleagues in countries where they carried out fieldwork. Just as the wise natives of the Vaupés and elsewhere, the founders of Cosmanthopolis turned a critical eye to the cult of personality, for they suspected that behind a sudden and often hyperbolic success there are usually hidden agendas praising the individual at the expense of the collectivity. For this reason, they discouraged the tendency toward the proliferation of those intellectual hybrids that in vulgar parlance are qualified as “ethnic chic.”³ These distinguished professors who thrive in fancy Metropolis universities brought from the Periphery great contributions that triggered off and kept alive polemics that are mostly useful to break the sleepy routine typical of Kuhnian normal science. However, most of them did precious little to bring recognition to the original traditions that inspired them.⁴ Anyway, Cosmanthopolis pursued its course of small transgressions amidst a well looked-after social tranquility and intellectual justice, when major forces began to act (once

3 Some thinkers, such as Ahmad (1992), do not conceal their deep discomfort with the pattern according to which intellectuals that migrate to Metropolis take on the role of spokespersons for their countries, thus gagging those who stayed to live the realities the migrants left behind.

4 To publish in English may bring recognition to authors, but hardly ever to their national anthropology. In my own case, like a black cat on a snow field (as in the luminous image of Brazilian novelist Érico Veríssimo during a trip to the United States), I have been given some credit for work that in fact does not result from a solitary and individual effort, but is rather the outcome of belonging to a specific national anthropological tradition. My individual production and my national tradition together make up a unique combination of both inner and outer influences without losing specificity. Students from the Metropolis, or others in similar situations who read my texts and are struck by certain unfamiliar descriptions and postures, have no way of reaching the imperceptible framework that gives me support and coherence. Nevertheless, not being seen does not mean it does not exist, as with the “peoples without history” who do not show their history because western scholars have no means to assess it. What passes as absence in some, unfortunately, is often the product of the ignorance of others.

more, we are inspired by indigenous ethnography). One day the Demiurge gathered the elected people and presented them with the dilemma of choosing. He (always a he) displayed a series of objects and invited them to choose whatever they wanted. There was the whole set of traditional items and also a large number of unintelligible novelties. The elected people chose at will and discarded the rest. They took bows and arrows, canoes, clay pots, hammocks, and all the objects that made sense in their universe. Somewhat surprised, the Demiurge warned that the stuff they had rejected would be offered to the strangers, the white men who were yet to be part of the elected people's world. Engines, airplanes, radios, shotguns, clothes, and all sorts of unidentified objects ended up in the foreigners' hands. Inexorably, as time went by, the new generations were assaulted by strangers who came upon them out of the clear blue sky in their flying machines, wrapped up in artificial skins, and carrying fire-spitting tubes. Without request or excuses, they took over the land and turned the elected people into an oppressed if not vanquished lot. Adding insult to injury, in came the missionaries who, in Don Quixote fashion, charged upon Satan's illusive windmills in their attempt to save indigenous souls. In the process, they imposed on the latter the humiliating dominion of one of the local languages as well as, naturally, that of the whites in detriment of all the others. In retrospect, the new generations lamented the fact that their ancestors had made such a bad choice. But one thing was certain and a source of pride: the present-day power of the whites, for better or worse, is the result of the Indians' own agency. Because *they* made the wrong choice the whites got to be what they are now, that is, the product of a fatal error, nevertheless, an *indigenous* one. The Indians lost precious goods, lives, land, and autonomy in most cases, but they maintain their self-esteem and the conviction that once they had their destiny in their own hands. If they did it in the past, surely, they can do it again in the present or in the future.

So, it came to be that Cosmanthropolis too was suddenly colonized by a flood of smart technologies and entrepreneurial knowledge that destabilized its horizontal world of equality in difference, and planted the seed of verticality of power in the system of production, distribution, and consumption of anthropological goods. Its members, too, suffered the imposition of the humiliating dominion of one language over all others. National references that lent organic and cosmopolitan flavor to the profession were lost. The concentration of wealth that rendered obsolete the mechanisms controlling inequality was that

great! Recognition of the advantages and legitimacy of other kinds of knowledge lost its structural importance. Cosmanthropolis collapsed and was replaced with the growing hegemony of Metropolis, while the rest, fragmented and impotent, came to be known as Periphery and succumbed to self-commiseration and the lament for history's unfairness.

The punch line

What then would be the central issues that prevent the blooming of a genuinely cosmopolitan anthropology? We have seen some: the strong linguistic hegemony, the inequality of the editorial market, the intransitivity of ideas from Periphery to Metropolis (or worse, the latter's unwillingness to acknowledge inspiration coming from the former), and even the studied ignorance about what is produced outside the Metropolis. All of this greatly contributes to the invisibility of that which is not Metropolitan. Let us see some examples.

In the 1990s, Metropolitan anthropologists became aware of something many Latin American anthropologies had long known, namely, the need to bring the indigenous issue to the wider political context. Some (for instance, Thomas 1991) promoted an act of contrition for Metropolitan naiveté or guilt for having created a culturally exotic and politically isolated Other. Apparently, it had never occurred to them to gaze beyond their professional navel, to look for anthropological alternatives and find out whether their malaise came from anthropology as a universal discipline, or from their specific way of practicing it. This amounts to an ethnocentric or myopic vision of the discipline, which, after all, as a field of knowledge, is much more than the mere sum of its professionals, regardless of where they happen to work. Moreover, to abandon the quest for cultural diversity with the argument that cultivating it diminishes the natives with anachronistic exoticism and contributes to the domination of the weak is to miss the political point of what difference really means. It is precisely the insistence on the value of diversity that can act as an antidote against the West's arrogance in its certainty about its own power and the impotence of the Rest. Indeed, it is this very difference that can destabilize the imperturbable self-satisfaction of the Metropolis and stimulate Metropolitanans to do ethnography at home. However, when they try to do what they call "repatriation of anthropology" (Marcus and Fischer 1986: 111-136; Marcus 1998: 247, 252), they collide with the lack of that political *savoir faire* that distinguishes Latin American anthropologists, for whom

anthropology-at-home is as old as anthropology itself. When Metropolitans discover that anthropology does not live by primitives alone, they simply propose turning their backs on them and embrace the study of the Center and of the gigantic power web that entraps peoples in the Periphery. This syndrome seems to elicit a nearly matricidal reaction regarding the discipline. Accused, for example, of transforming the concept of culture into an instrument of domination (Abu-Lugod 1991), anthropology is also taken to task for reinforcing the imbalance of world power that these scholars seem to have just discovered. After decades of studying abroad, they realize that power, more than anything else, screams out for anthropological attention. We might call this syndrome nostalgia of the Center.

Thus, to go on studying “primitives” takes on a politically incorrect quality if not done in the mode of denunciations of oppression and historical injustice. In other words, in the eyes of these political Adventists, anthropological work is legitimate in so far as it inquires about the ways of western domination over marginalized peoples. In and of themselves, these peoples would be of no interest apart from sources of exoticism. It is as though they depended on anthropologists to make their “agonies of oppression” (Herzfeld 1997: 23) politically visible and relevant. In fact, some authors seem to reproach anthropology for having dedicated too much time “to the study of abstruse customs of out-of-the-way tribes” (MacClancy 2002: 1).

Let us imagine the rise of a “reverse anthropology” à la Wagner and Kirsch. In a passing remark in *The invention of culture* (1981), Roy Wagner speculated about the possibility of turning anthropology around and having indigenous peoples do what academic anthropologists are accustomed to do among indigenous peoples, i.e., “literalize” the metaphors of modern Western society. Wagner did not follow up this idea, but in *Reverse Anthropology* (2006), Stuart Kirsch expands Wagner’s flitting idea and has inspired me to see reverse anthropology as a much more promising notion for the future of anthropology than simple mirror images of distanced mutual gazing. To my mind, in Kirsch’s version, the tiny crack opened by Wagner widened into an open door. He realized that the rites and narratives in which he participated in New Guinea were no more nor less than the manifestations of Yonggom “theoretical consciousness.” It is a fine and complex system he deems comparable to the anthropological analysis of their myths. I take this ‘comparable’ in the sense of intelligibility rather than profundity because, no matter how meticulous an anthropological study can be, it hardly reaches the depths and

nuances of meaning of a native analysis.⁵ This is in part what Huron historian Georges Sioui (1995) laments when he expresses his frustration at the difficulty “whites” have in understanding what the Indians try to explain. Reverse anthropology is fine, but we would be wise not to entertain too high a hope of injecting a modicum of humility in the West. An effective change in this direction might only come as a result of the Center’s own internal contradictions and institutional exhaustion affecting its political and economic core.

Kirsch’s ethical-ethnographic considerations allow us to reflect upon symmetries and intercultural dialogues. If a reverse anthropology is possible, what can an “indigenous anthropology” be? To mention the Brazilian case, now that an increasing number of Indians have access to higher education, one expects that, once equipped with the anthropological instruments of analysis, some will engage in “auto-ethnographies” (Ramos 2008). In his recent doctoral dissertation, anthropologist Gersem Luciano, a Baniwa Indian from Northwest Amazon in Brazil, expresses the same opinion:

This new political scenario of indigenous rights has brought about new challenges to anthropology’s disciplinary trajectory regarding research among indigenous peoples. The first issue is the change in hegemony in ethnographic research. Instead of a white subject studying indigenous subjects as objects of knowledge, allowing him (her) to claim a pretended objectivity and epistemic neutrality, there is a new situation of indigenous subjects studying themselves as thinking and knowledge producing subjects, and soon there will also be indigenous subjects researching and studying whites, including anthropologists (Luciano 2011: 105).

In the next few years, this process is likely to thrive. However, we should bear in mind the risks of overestimating the benefits of formal education in detriment of traditional modes of learning

5 In his ethnography, Kirsch describes a Yonggom epistemological system that explains their universe with great sophistication. This epistemological apparatus provides those people with the intellectual means to understand and act upon the troubles caused by the invasion of their territory, whether by powerful mining companies with their unrelenting environmental devastation, or by the brutal dictatorial regime imposed by Indonesia upon the western part of New Guinea.

carried on by oral transmission for which a different cognitive apparatus greatly based on imitation and repetition is required. Just as formal schooling opens new horizons it can also potentially erase or dim systems of knowledge that are central to indigenous intellectual traditions.

In sum, I propose to bring back the disquiet that led Fabian (1983) to take anthropologists to task for denying coevalness to non-Western peoples. It is also worthwhile to heed Jack Goody's (2008) critical position regarding the way Westerners have stolen the History of the Chinese, the Muslims, etc., by ignoring their inventions in order to promote them as their own. As Fabian contends, anthropologists have already a significant measure of responsibility for stealing History from indigenous peoples, so, let us not also contribute to the theft of their theories.

All this is to show that a truly ecumenical anthropology would have to contemplate not only peripheral academic anthropologies, as Hannerz (2008) proposes, but also indigenous theoretical production. My own discomfort relates to the apparent distaste of ethnographers for acknowledging native epistemologies – be they central or peripheral – for what they are rather than masking them under tired rubrics such as myths, cosmologies, and beliefs (Ramos 2011: 110-113). With precious few exceptions (Evans-Pritchard's study of Zande witchcraft is a brilliant counter-example), the most theoretically ambitious anthropologists have risen above the crowd due to their shrewd use of native concepts as raw material to build up grand schemes on a macro scale. Local theories have been transformed into something larger than life, thus relegating native theories to the anonymity of "ethnographic data." When taken for what they really are, native epistemological contributions would further enrich that discussion of anthropological ecumene by adding one more turn to the spiral of world anthropologies.

Let us return to the Center versus Periphery debate. If Metropolitan anthropologists left Metropolis just for a moment and examined what anthropology looks like in the Periphery, they would see that contextualizing the local in a wider political perspective is the bread and butter of Mexican, Argentine or Brazilian anthropologies, to limit ourselves to the Latin American circuit. Their easily detectable canon is based on interethnic relations rather than on unitary monographic studies. Hence, for those who grew up professionally with the perception that to do anthropology is a political act (Ramos 1999/2000), which, by definition, favors the contextualization of social transactions within and between peoples, those issues that of late have disturbed

our Metropolitan colleagues seem to us a little like inventing gunpowder anew. To suppose that suppressing the ethnographic canon in and of itself might eliminate the pernicious effects of exoticism is to distort the issue, for anthropological work never happens in a vacuum, whether in the field or in the office. Moreover, anthropologists have no full control of their products, for they become part of the huge market of symbolic exchanges with its own rules and consequences. Depending on the socio-political context, the reading public, a major factor in anthropological production, may ultimately neutralize a potentially fecund idea. I hope someday, somehow, we can pierce through the Metropolis shell and inseminate it with the virus of self-doubt. True, all societies have defense mechanisms against possible attacks on their integrity, but we seldom find as strong a capacity as that of the Metropolis to phagocytize differences, be these internal or external, converting them in an easily digestible pulp.

On the one hand, the voracious appetite of the dissemination centers of cultural goods is quite evident. On the other, there is always a dialectical movement underlying processual history that unfolds in silence, most often imperceptibly, but with the power to change the course of events. It is very likely that the rising tide of globalization contains in itself the blueprint of its own confines and the possibility of a new era. Even taking into account the negligible power of anthropological discourse to change hearts and minds in this vast world, we have reason to believe that not everything is lost in the smog of globalization.

Closing the circle, let us go back to the anthropological utopia. We can see, on the horizon, the growing shape of an entity that may well transform the political scenario of world anthropology. It is called WAN for short (World Anthropologies Network) and is said to be a collective movement for the pluralization of the modes of anthropological practice in a context where Anglo-Saxon discourses about difference are still hegemonic (Ribeiro 2005). WAN was created by anthropologists from various countries, mostly peripheral, with the purpose of gazing critically at the discipline's international dissemination, enlarging its plural landscape, and engaging professionals in the construction of a polycentric anthropological field (Ribeiro 2005; Ribeiro and Escobar 2006), or, better still, of diverse but politically and academically equivalent differences. This seed needs to be nourished with great care if we want it to bear the fruit it promises.

The lessons coming from both Peripheral and Native wisdom ultimately show us that cosmopolitanism does not, after all, reside

in the Metropolis, which, with honorable exceptions, tends to be satisfied with the tedious exercise of self-referencing. Anthropological cosmopolitics (Ribeiro 2011) is out there, in a space where we can read in various languages, and where we welcome ideas from abroad free from acritical and sterile allegiances. It is a space where one recognizes that the agency of guileless ancestors has the strength and drive to overcome the status quo. It is where, in the politically incorrect saying of Domingo Faustino Sarmiento, the nineteenth-century Argentine writer and strategist, “*las cosas hay que hacerlas. Bien o mal, hay que hacerlas*” (Things have to be done. For better or worse, one has to do them)!

References cited

- Abu-Lughod, L. 1991. “Writing against culture.” In: Richard Fox (ed.) *Recapturing Anthropology: Working in the present*. pp. 137–162. Santa Fé: School of American Research Press.
- Ahmad, A. 1992. *Theory: Classes, nations, literature*. London: Verso.
- Fabian, Johannes. 1983. *Time and the other: How anthropology makes its object*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Goody, Jack. 2006. *The Theft of History*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hannerz, U. 2008. “Afterword. Anthropology’s global ecumene.” In: A. Bošković (ed.), *Other people’s anthropologies: Ethnographic practice on the margins*, pp. 215–230. Oxford: Berghahn Books.
- Herzfeld, M. 1997. *Cultural Intimacy: Social poetics in the nation–state*. Londres: Routledge.
- Kirsch, Stuart. 2006. *Reverse anthropology: Indigenous analysis of social and environmental relations in New Guinea*.

Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Luciano, Gersem J. S. 2011. "Educação para manejo e domesticação do mundo: Entre a escola ideal e a escola real, os dilemas da educação escolar indígena no Alto Rio Negro." Doctoral dissertation, Department of Anthropology, University of Brasília.

MacClancy, J. 2002. "Introduction: Taking people seriously." In: Jeremy MacClancy (ed.), *Exotic no more: Anthropology on the front lines*. pp. 1-14. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Marcus, G. E. 1998. *Ethnography through thick & thin*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Marcus, G. E. and Michael Fischer. 1986. *Anthropology as Cultural Critique*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Ramos, Alcida Ramos. 2011. "Por una antropología ecuménica." In: Alejandro Grimson, Silvia Merenson and Gabriel Noel, (eds.), *Antropología ahora: Debates sobre la alteridad*. pp. 97-124. Buenos Aires: Siglo XXI Editores.

_____. 2008. "Disengaging anthropology." In: D. Poole, (ed.), *A Companion to Latin American Anthropology*. pp. 466-484. Oxford: Blackwell.

_____. 1999-2000. The anthropologist as political actor. *Journal of Latin American Anthropology* 4(2)-5(1): 172-189.

Ribeiro, Gustavo Lins. 2011. "La antropología como cosmopolítica: globalizar la antropología hoy." In: Alejandro Grimson, Silvia Merenson and Gabriel Noel,

(eds.), *Antropología ahora: Debates sobre la alteridad*. pp. 69-96. Buenos Aires: Siglo XXI Editores.

_____. 2005. World Anthropologies: Cosmopolitics, power and theory in anthropology. Série Antropologia 377. Department of Anthropology, University of Brasilia.

Ribeiro, Gustavo Lins and Arturo Escobar (eds.). 2006. *World Anthropologies: Disciplinary transformations within systems of power*. Oxford: Berg.

Sioui, Georges. 1995. *For an Amerindian autohistory: An essay on the foundations of a social ethic*. Montreal: McGill University Press.

Thomas, N. 1991. Against ethnography. *Cultural Anthropology* 6(3): 306-322.

Wagner, Roy 1981. *The invention of culture*. New York: Phoenix.