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When ethics runs counter to morals

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In the present conjuncture, Brazilian social anthropologists are facing a major challenge to their work. I suggest that this happens because of anthropology's central dependence on the ethnographic method. The ethnographer's direct contact with the people they study gives rise to an ethical response that moves the ethnographer beyond abstract moral principles. But, in the world of Jair Bolsonaro or Donald Trump, ethics counters morals: the objectivized, legalistic formulas favored by these autocratic ideologues (supposedly representing "tradition" and "identity") turn out not to correspond to the actual conditions that face the persons that anthropologists meet in the field, who experience oppression and suffering in their lives.

Keywords: Brazil, conjunction, ethnographic gesture, de-ethnocentrification, ethics, morals, conservatism, progressivism, pharysism

A conjuncture. Around 2014, after a long period of prosperity and growth, when democratic institutions and the rule of law were strengthened and policies of poverty reduction were successfully enforced, Brazil entered into a period of political and social crisis. Eventually, in 2018, the presidential elections that brought to power Jair Messias Bolsonaro established a new conjuncture that has been characterized by the systematic and explicit undermining of the democratic achievements that marked the previous period. This is an issue of more than mere national interest, not only because these changes in Brazil correspond to an authoritarian drift that can be witnessed in many other countries around the world (and namely in countries where the civil rights of the less privileged sectors of the population had significantly improved from the mid-1990s to the 2000s, such as the United States, India, Russia, or Turkey) but also because Bolsonaro's destructive environmental policies moved by agro-industrial interests are decisively contributing toward the increase of the climate emergency.

This collection of essays brings together a series of analyses of the present Brazilian situation as a “conjuncture”—that is, to take recourse to the old Marxist notion, as a structured set of factors that are systemically interrelated, emerging as a recognizable condition (see Sotiris 2014). They focus on daily life (Feltran), religious adherence (Almeida), military and police intervention (Leirner), and gender and personhood (Pinheiro-Machado and Scalco). We have to congratulate Federico Neiburg and Omar Ribeiro Thomaz for having launched this debate and then mobilized the publication of its results. What we have here is an impressive overview that can help us significantly grasp a condition that, while specifically Brazilian, has global echoes. In these concluding notes, I aim to highlight two of the more general implications of the material here presented.

Useless and seditious. In their introduction, Federico Neiburg and Omar Thomaz argue that the present Brazilian conjuncture challenges anthropologists not only as citizens but also in their specific quality as social scientists. That is, those who control the Brazilian state apparatus today explicitly perceive social anthropology as an enemy and attempt, both by positive actions against academic life and by media attacks, to counter the role that our Brazilian colleagues have had over the decades as mediators for the interests of indigenous populations, African descendants, and the poor (in particular, but not only, since the new Citizen Constitution in 1988; see Trajano Filho and Lins Ribeiro 2004). A direct and concerted attack has been made on institutions, such as Fundação Nacional do Índio (FUNAI), the federal agency that protects the interests of the Amerindian populations, and many of the NGOs that were at the forefront of the protection of the disadvantaged (the landless movement, the *quilombo* movement, various antiprohibitionist movements, etc.) as well as of environmental protection. These were institutions where anthropologists have always played a decisive role. In many ways, what is happening today in Brazil is reminiscent of the suspicions against social anthropology that characterized the apartheid regime in South Africa during the second half of the twentieth century, when Monica Wilson held up the flag of the fight against segregationist policies (Brokensha 1983), or in the United Kingdom in the early 1980s, when Margaret Thatcher and her followers mounted a public attack on the discipline (see Pina-Cabral and Bowman 2020). On such occasions, anthropology is glossed as being “a pointless, impractical discipline” and anthropologists are accused of being “dangerous agents of sedition”—a strangely contradictory set of terms.

Why do anthropologists play this role for right-wing autocrats and neoliberal ideologues—when so many other social sciences seem to go scot-free? I believe that the answer to this question has to do with the very nature of the anthropological tradition. Together with some sociologists and some human geographers, social anthropologists are

characteristically moved in their analytical efforts by qualitative research inspired in the ethnographic method. This means that most anthropologists have had a direct personal encounter with the populations they studied, having shared their forms of life “in the field”; they have experienced firsthand the effects of the oppression to which such populations are often subjected. Curiously, even when anthropologists “study up,” that sense of moral ambiguity that results from ethical engagement is almost inevitable (see Pina-Cabral and Lima 2000).

Characteristically, ethnographically inspired social scientists are moved by a process of ideological displacement that is associated to the cognitive dissonance that they experience when they dislocate themselves to “the field” (wherever that is). This de-ethnocentrification (as Julian Pitt-Rivers [1992] called it) does not mean that they adopt as their personal outlook the worldview of the people they study—not at all. In fact, today in Brazil, as our colleagues demonstrate in the essays above, such populations are held in the grip of right-wing political ideologies that favor their increased ethnic and class oppression. To those who promote authoritarian and reactionary policies, anthropologists appear as “the enemy within”: their academic prestige and their relative social privilege appear incompatible with their sense of sharing a condition with the people they study. The result is that what anthropologists demonstrate in their studies strikes those in power as being both seditious and irrelevant. The struggle of social anthropologists in apartheid South Africa—some of whom even gave their lives for the cause of justice, as was the case with David Webster (2009)—is today being revisited by those who, in Brazil, Turkey, China, or Russia are finding that the practice of their academic vocation is becoming increasingly dangerous.

Ethics versus morals. I suggest that this happens because, way beyond any established or codified social values or norms, the ethnographer’s direct contact with the people they study

gives rise to an ethical response that moves the ethnographer beyond abstract moral principles. Contrary to Michael Lambek (2010: 9), I find it useful to distinguish ethics from morals, since they correspond to different dispositions, with different implications. To fail to distinguish is to close anthropology within a kind of symmetrical relativism that ultimately makes the very possibility of the ethnographic gesture incomprehensible. In fact, Charles Stafford's essay in Lambek's book, written in a self-reflexive mode, highlights ethnographically precisely why it is necessary to make this critical distinction (2010). He puts it succinctly: "morality (defined as the rules, norms, and conventions against which human behaviors are judged good or bad) is structure, whereas ethics is agency" (2010: 187–88). As Emmanuel Levinas has taught us, ethics emerges as coresponsibility due to the inescapable closeness of the other; while morals corresponds to the historically consolidated objectifications of this drive (1989). Thus, ethics is not an option: it is something that persons cannot repress without suffering a profound wound to their own personhood. Morals, to the contrary, is always a choice.

The ethical drive is a function of our primary intersubjectivity as live beings. However, as opposed to other animals, humans experience a secondary kind of intersubjectivity when they become persons (see Trevarthen 1998). As a result of having accessed language and propositional thinking, persons transcend—that is, persons acquire the capacity to look at the world as creation and to see themselves as existing within it (see Hutto and Myin 2013). The capacity for self-reflection that characterizes each one of us as a person is associated with a form of being in company with others in a world that is now scaffolded by symbols—that is, by meaning-bearing objects that we approach as being external to us (see Pina-Cabral 2017).

Ethics is the motor, as it were, that launches morality, but it is never identical with it. While ethics is a disposition to act and manifests itself as a drive, morals—because it is a

symbolical scaffolding of the world—is experienced as an imposition, a norm. It is the experience of being ethically challenged that provides both the sense of verisimilitude to ethnographic writing and that necessarily launches the kind of critical dislocation that Stafford examines (2010). In sum, ethnographers can only learn of morals because they experience ethics. Contrary to what the enemies of anthropology think, the ethnographic gesture is never useless because it is always seditious.

Conservative or progressive. This leads us to consider the classifications that we commonly use to qualify the political ideologies that are at stake in our contemporary mediatized political struggles, from Brazil to the United States to Turkey to Saudi Arabia and on to Russia. Such regimes are associated with a kind of political response that can be characterized as “reactionary” in that there is a violent reaction against what it sees as a *status quo ante*, categorized as morally lax and prone to give rise to *anomie* (Durkheim’s term for a deeply generalized sense of social disorder). The perpetrators of these mediatized attacks, however, do not call themselves reactionary. They call themselves “conservatives,” a term that makes no sense outside of the binomial it constitutes with “progressive.” In turn, their opponents adopt with equal glee the label of progressive.

The conservative/progressive binomial, however, much as one might wish otherwise, necessarily validates the modernist myth according to which history moves essentially in only one direction: progress. In turn, progress is conceived as moving from religious collectivism toward secular individualism. Conservatism, therefore, is the response that attempts to control “too much of a good thing”; supposedly favoring the values of collective morality as enshrined in “tradition.” For this reason, Thatcher, Reagan, Putin, Bolsonaro, the Saudi Prince Regent, or Erdogan all claim that they are in favor of “tradition.”

They are indeed reactionary to the extent that they see themselves as reacting to a

previous progressivist attack to their engrained moral values, but are they conservative? Such a claim has to be matched to the political agendas that they actually promote. For example, there was nothing “traditional” in Thatcher. She was a revolutionary, who promoted a radical kind of individualist liberalism that eroded the more engrained values of British national life, such as the Christian collectivism that had given rise to the National Health Service, and to a range of other public services. Over the decades, her acolytes and descendants have overseen a profound movement of institutional erosion that is now coming to maturity in the tragedy of Brexit. Similarly, the policies that Bolsonaro and his associates promote in Brazil are moved by a neoliberal Pentecostalist agenda. But can they by any stretch of the imagination be held to represent, portray, or validate the values that characterized “Brazilian traditional society”? The “traditional family values” that Thatcher or Bolsonaro claim to defend can in no way be furthered by the policies that they promote. But then, in the United States, the same politician who seeks to make medical services inaccessible to the poorest people, is bound to go to war to promote “life” under the guise of a set of misconceived policies criminalizing abortion.

The “conservative” claims of such people, therefore, are based on abstract claims to a set of largely disembodied moral concepts (“work,” “thrift,” “life,” “piety,” “sexual shame,” “nation”, etc.) that are introduced in the discourse as formulas, independently of the ambiguities and complexities of their actual implementation. These formulas are then used to promote a type of mediatized discourse that shields such people from the necessary ambiguities of an engagement with real life—that is, from ethical calls to coresponsibility.

Once again, ethics counters morals and vice versa, in that the objectivized, legalistic formulas that are supposed to represent “tradition” have little to do with the actual conditions that face people who experience suffering (or joy for that matter) in their lives. The closest mode of qualifying this type of political discourse, therefore, is not as “conservatism” but as “pharysism,” which the dictionary defines as “a rigid observance of external forms of religion

or conduct without genuine piety.” It is the privilege and the bane of ethnographically based anthropology to move beyond it as an inevitable outcome of its inherited methodological tradition.

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