For a sociology of India: Some comments from Brazil

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> We have, then, this problem of 'communication'—or gap in com-
> munication—among those who are contributors to the sociology of
> India. . . . The establishment of a common ground for discussion,
> therefore, remains as important a task now as it has been in the past
> and as difficult as Dumont says he found it.
>
> T.N. Madan (1982: 417)

The history of anthropology has been built on controversies and debates of
various sorts, generally among figures who are already prominent or
become so in the process. It is interesting to note that the ideas of the
opponent who is apparently defeated are seldom overcome; more often
than not, they are assimilated into the discipline's 'tradition'. What marks
the controversies is not only differences of theoretical stance but also
problems of communication and consequent misunderstandings.

One may here recall that, in the early 1950s, Evans-Pritchard's views on
the relationship between anthropology and history instigated a vigorous
debate in the discipline, which involved everybody who was anybody at the
time, including Radcliffe-Brown and Alfred Kroeber. In the 1960s, it was
the time for the Correspondence columns of *Man* to carry several discussions,
some of which developed around a central topic and a leading figure, and
for which the editor seemed to delight in making up colourful titles. Of the
several topics discussed in more than one issue, 'Virgin Birth' was one of
the longest and most controversial, showing Edmund Leach at his best,

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debating the issue of the lack of concept of paternity among Malinowski's Trobriand Islanders.

'For a sociology of India', initially the title of an article and, later, an annual feature in *Contributions to Indian sociology*, also is a debate. However, this debate must be included in the history of anthropology as an exemplary case of a different kind of discussion. Perhaps no other debate has lasted, as this one has for more than thirty years; perhaps no other recorded discussion has involved anthropologists of so many nationalities (including French, English, Indian, German, Norwegian, Swiss and New-Zealander) offering diverse theoretical perspectives; and perhaps no other debate has emphasised as this one the conception of anthropology as a possibility of translation and communication among different cultures, a project proposed and a promise explicitly voiced earlier by Evans-Pritchard.

From a Brazilian perspective this debate has still other nuances. To us, the testimony of a debate which lasted so long comes as a surprise, for we generally avoid confrontations in the name of a cordiality which may not always exist. It calls our attention to the trajectory which *Contributions* followed: a European journal about India which moved to India itself. It also shows us that the difficulties we in Brazil generally feel in fitting ourselves into the international academic community are not unique and perhaps not exclusively due to the Portuguese language we speak. And, finally, it teaches us the rewards of serious and consistent dialogues. More specifically, this dialogue shows us a passage from an eminently European view of what anthropology should be to a more cosmopolitan though Indian project.

A view from Brazil

From an outsider's perspective, the development of the debate may be briefly seen as follows: The first four years, beginning in 1957, were characterised by a discussion about India which took place in Europe: the main protagonists then were Louis Dumont and David Pocock, founders of the journal and authors of the first 'For a sociology of India' essay, and F.G. Bailey, all of them having filled, what seem retrospectively, expected roles. On the French side (which included Pocock), the emphasis was on values and social representations: the view of the caste system as an ideological manifestation of religion, and the project of combining the views from within and from without. On the British side, there was the 'empiricism' of economic and political facts, the tangible reality of the villages, and the doubt as to whether the view from within could be even conceivable.

This Occidental discussion about India might have taken a different direction in 1962, when A.K. Saran reviewed the debate in *The eastern anthropologist*. Significantly, however, Saran's views became better known

only indirectly, when his former student T.N. Madan wrote his first contri-
bution to the debate in 1966. This early Indian reaction, which preceded
the changing of editorship from European to Indian hands, testifies to a
change from an argument conceived initially as between a French and a
British position to a European *versus* an Indian view, i.e., the radical
positions of Dumont/Pocock and Bailey are substituted by a different
pair—Dumont and Saran—with Madan anticipating the role he was to
carry in the long run, bridging the gap between the two extremes.

Starting in 1967, the 'Indian period' was initially marked by a polemical
article by J.P.S. Uberoi, who became the challenger of both European and
Indian viewpoints. This well-known contribution was perhaps the last
individual credo, since the tone of the debate gradually changed from
sharply worded individual intellectual positions to a more easy-paced
forum for Indian contributions intermingled with foreign articles, whose
authors apparently believed that one point of view would naturally correct
another. In the process, differences among Indian sociologists themselves
became apparent.

In 1982, a special issue to honour Louis Dumont, which followed numbers
devoted to his *Homo hierarchicus* in 1971 and M.N. Srinivas's *The
remembered village* in 1976, included T.N. Madan's own third piece for the
feature, suggesting reconciliation had been achieved between the different
heritages Indian sociologists had absorbed in the long term, including those
of Srinivas, Saran and Dumont. For Madan, however, the difficulty of
communication between specialists of India still persisted, and in the
characteristic Hindu style of never giving up a battle, he suggested that
evasion or exclusion would not solve the problem. The debate should not
go on merely for its own sake, he seemed to say, but produce conceptual
clarity, which he did not think had emerged.

Despite this pessimistic diagnosis, recent years leave the foreign reader
with a different perspective, now that European contributors make a point
to engage in the *debate*, while Indian contributors re-evaluate the *discipline*
itself. Published in 1987, the first number of volume 21 conveys this impres-
sion: it pays homage to two South Asian anthropologists of international
renown, viz., Stanley Tambiah and Gananath Obeyesekere, bringing to
public view the extent to which South Asian social science has been
contributing to the development of 'Western' anthropology.

Difficult dialogues

Thus, once again, the history of the discipline repeats itself: rebellion and
assimilation, always through controversial dialogues. 'For a sociology of
India' is a portrait, or perhaps the script, of one such dialogue, and it is
specific in that here differences of social contexts (including colonialism),

theoretical perspectives, and ethical principles appear in a more highlighted form than in earlier debates in the history of social/cultural anthropology.

The ideal of intercommunicable discourse was present from the start, which Dumont explicated by considering the contents of the journal as ' "contributions" to a presumably common endeavour' (cited in Galey 1982: 19). It was in consonance with that orientation that he and Pocock 'did not sign the articles and took joint responsibility for them' (ibid.).

But apparently Dumont was not ready to accept the different viewpoints that his and Pocock's proposal engendered and could not help voicing his disappointment when the journal did not receive the consensual approval he expected. He thus gave the impression of having failed to create a scientific community around the study of India, complaining about the conditions of scientific work, in which 'one is compelled to retreat from the collective orientations . . . to the more personal orientations of the philosopher, writer or artist, to admit that the products of the craft are "not cumulative" ' and that the scientific community hardly exists at all (Galey 1982: 20).

Faced with the prestige of the journal, however, one feels an incongruence between the sociology which Dumont practises and his refusal to accept that the individual work of the scientists adds up, under any circumstances, to a collective history. The scientist here replaces Mauss's magician.

From Mauss we also recall that collective representations or cosmologies need rituals because consensus is an ideological goal which can be achieved only through 'acts of society'. In terms of the present debate, a stage of comfortable cosmopolitanism was reached only after it was accepted that antagonistic positions had to be voiced. In this context, the engagement in the dialogue was the unavoidable and not always easy path to confront opposing viewpoints, but it brought with it the additional advantage that the act of debating created a specific ritual place, besides the fact that it led to the recognition of the contenders as potential equals.

It is thus interesting to note that Indian sociologists themselves accepted the polarisation, and that it was this polarisation which provided the basic and creative motivation which allowed them to give better answers to the questions asked of them by Western sociologists. The West predefined the questions, and the Indians excelled themselves at questioning the questions themselves, and at offering answers from different perspectives. The result was a paradoxical sort of 'Indian cosmopolitanism'.

The fact that the ideas discussed were no more important than the continuation of the debate is attested by the fact that, though the opening of the dialogue was not achieved easily, Indian sociologists over time changed roles from challengers to participants and moderated their attitudes: The swarajist Uberoi of 1968 became more openly structuralist in 1974; the critic Madan of 1966 recognised openly the mobilising role of Dumont in 1982. The example of Saran is revealing, since his ideas were introduced in

the journal by Madan, and received an answer from an irritated Dumont.[1] Indian sociologists seem thus to have had a more pragmatic sociological perspective than Dumont himself.

This episode brings to light the old issue of power structure within the academic world, which is not altered substantially by the fact that English is the common language of the participants. But another issue is also clarified: it was Madan's position which, in the long run, made it possible for the dialogue to proceed towards the cosmopolitanism in which there is room for all. In this context, Saran's position was surprisingly the most comfortable: as a radical traditionalist, his extreme views excused him from taking part in a more committed communicative endeavour, despite his role as the respected and indispensable opponent.

To what extent the debate 'For a sociology of India' has played a central role in the style of anthropology that is carried on in India today is an open issue. One may also raise, in this context, the question about whether the debate favoured a satisfactory degree of intercommunication. Here the point is that perhaps the act of comparing in which anthropologists dwell is incompatible with dialogue *tout court*. As Dumont has pointed out, comparison implies difference, and difference, hierarchy, and thus the ideal of communion between equals does not take place. But one could also offer the hypothesis that, rather than a *dialogue*, 'For a sociology of India' constituted a symbolic forum for the intentions of the participants in a performative manner, and that, by expressing the wish and need for communication, this in turn made possible the achievement of the desired result. In fact, Indian anthropologists are invited abroad nowadays not just because of the ethnographic interest that India has always awakened, but also for the theoretical contributions Indian social scientists offer and for the specific approach with which they tackle new or traditional themes. Conversely, when foreign scholars visit India, they are not merely expected to bring the latest trends—which certainly are viewed with caution—but are expected to listen to what Indians have to say. This is so because through debates, controversies and dialogues with the world outside, Indian anthropology has found its own path, which makes it both heir to classical Indian thinking as much as a branch of a sociology of European origin.

The debate as mirror

When compared to India, we Brazilians could be said to have had more luck, and at the same time less luck, in not having interlocutors of the stature of a Louis Dumont, a Max Weber, or a Karl Marx. Even Lévi-Strauss, when he chose our country to research, studied the Xavante and

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[1] Madan modified Saran's statement 'social reality *qua* social has no outside' to 'social reality *qua* reality has no outside'. Dumont used Madan's version (see Dumont 1966; Madan 1966; Saran 1962).

the Bororo, and not the national society. Except for the testimony of *Tristes tropiques* (1963), we would know nothing about the impression we made on him.

We are then poor in exoticism, unworthy of consideration as a 'type of civilisation' to be contrasted with the West (actually we believe ourselves to be *part* of the West), and deprived of a reciprocal dialogue with European centres. In truth, it seems we have never gotten beyond that uninteresting role of an 'underdeveloped' country or, perhaps worse, of a country that is perennially aspiring to development and modernity. And if we cannot attract the attention of Europeans, consequently we do not exist for Indians, unless we fight European models (as, for instance, in the case of 'dependency theory' or 'theology of liberation') and become their ally—which most of the time we prefer not to do.

This situation has other aspects, however. On the one hand, it gives us a certain freedom to develop ideas of our own, in what was already called by Otavio Velho (1983) 'the privileges of underdevelopment'. Our problems can thus, in great measure, be defined by ourselves. This contrasts with the distress of Indian sociologists who complain that most of their intellectual problems have been predefined for them by the West. Add to this the fact that we express ourselves and publish in Portuguese, a language known only by a few, which increases our isolation, an isolation which keeps the discussions comfortably within a well-defined academic community. But if relative isolation has its attractiveness, the other side of the coin is that, deprived of an effective dialogue with the rest of the world (and kept away from the ideological promise of the universality of science), our vices are apt to proliferate.

One of the important lessons which the debate 'For a sociology of India' teaches us is that it is only through difficult dialogues that a project of true cosmopolitanism may be achieved; it is by facing challenges, correcting routes, adjusting viewpoints, that one's identity becomes more solid and sound.

Lévi-Strauss's remarks on his teaching experience in Brazil during the 1930s are unfortunately still valid. In *Tristes tropiques* he referred to the fact that the students wanted to know everything but, whatever the field of interest, only the most recent theories seemed to be worthy of being scrutinised. This state of affairs resounds today in the dialogues we open with renowned authors, but which do not receive any answers—in the reanalysis of classical works, written as if we were widely read—in choosing to ignore the fact that the moment we leave behind the frontiers of the country, what here was a theoretical discussion, almost immediately becomes merely regional ethnography.

In this context, the Brazilians' parochialism seems to rest in the pretence of a universalism which is a mere copy of the universalism of others (generally French), while we consciously believe our strength to be granted

by the political debates which are incorporated in the theories we generate. The situation of Indians appears different from ours: in stark contrast to the cosmopolitan imprint which they project in their works, a conspicuous silence blankets the existence of 'castes' within the academic community. This silence is curious, though perhaps it can be explained by the fact that that discussion would reveal the 'exotic' side of science in India, which Indians prefer to deny. On this scene, a third character has recently made its appearance during the last years in both India and Brazil, and this is a younger generation of European and North American scientists who, contrary to the great names in the field, seek *peripheral* countries to visit and to write about. The question is open as to whether a new cosmopolitan consciousness will sprout, or as to whether an international dialogue has become more feasible, or yet, if the legitimation of the periphery serves the interests of the visitors more than it does those of the hosts. The latest issues of *Contributions* reveal this trend, as do recent publications in Brazil.

These are but a few comments about the endeavour to create a genuine intellectual community which was initiated by Dumont and Pocock and nourished by Madan's decision to make the debate 'For a sociology of India' an ongoing one. If we are able to think about the core issues in academic dialogues, then perhaps it will be possible for communication to become more realistic and, hopefully, more effective and productive, though probably it will be no less difficult. Gone are the days when, as in the example of 'Virgin Birth', English anthropologists sat at home engaged in a discussion for all the world to watch. The more than thirty years of 'For a sociology of India' may give us some clues to help us in our reflections on the subject, after we grant it the recognition it deserves as an exemplary debate in the history of social anthropology.

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