

# OTHER PEOPLE'S ANTHROPOLOGIES



*Ethnographic Practice on the Margins*

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***Berghahn Books***  
New York • Oxford

First edition published in 2008 by

***Berghahn Books***

www.berghahnbooks.com

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### **Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Other people's anthropologies : ethnographic practice on the margins / edited by Aleksandar Bošković. — 1st ed.

p. cm.

Papers originally presented at a workshop at the 2004 EASA conference in Vienna.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-84545-398-5 (hardback : alk. paper)

1. Ethnology—Congresses. I. Bošković, Aleksandar. II. European Association of Social Anthropologists. Conference (2004 : Vienna, Austria)

GN302.0884 2007

305.8—dc22

2007042675

### **British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data**

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Printed in the United States on acid-free paper

ISBN-13: 978-1-84545-398-5 hardback

*Chapter 11*

**Anthropology with No Guilt—  
A View from Brazil\***

**Mariza G.S. Peirano**



**INTRODUCTION**

A new divide seems to be going on in anthropology: while in the metropolitan centers it appears either doomed to extinction or bent into “studies” (feminist, cultural, science and technology, etc.), in other locations anthropology is well and thriving or, if not thriving, at least providing a positive and constructive edge or approach. Renowned scholars in the 1960s warned their colleagues that anthropology might become a science without an object because of the physical disappearance of whole populations following contact, and because of the rejection of anthropology by newly independent nations. Anthropology’s past sins and malpractices would lead former “natives” to turn anthropologists down. A decolonization of the social sciences was in order.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, time has confirmed these expectations, but something not anticipated happened—due to the guilt associated with colonialism, anthropology is being devalued even by the descendants of those who first crafted the idea of overseas fieldwork, i.e., the anthropologists from the centers.

In this chapter, I will confront this apparent puzzle by examining the Brazilian case in the context of the larger global picture. I start by looking at some of the past sins attributed to anthropology, and then turn them upside down to detect possible values and virtues. I propose that, in Brazil, anthropology’s values and virtues are more stimulating than its sins; I also suggest that exoticism has been acculturated as “difference” (whether social,

cultural or territorial) and that guilt has not prospered in a context which has always demanded social scientists' commitment to the objects of their study. I then examine the plurality of otherness, as found in anthropology in Brazil, and conclude the paper with a brief discussion on the implications of the label "national anthropologies."

## SINS

The following is a retrospective list of past sins which have come to disturb today's "international" anthropologists (as per Gerholm & Hannerz 1982):

- (i) The first sin tells of power relations. For a long time, anthropology was defined by the exoticism of its subject matter and by the distance, conceived as both cultural and geographic, that separated the researcher from the researched group. This situation was part and parcel of a colonial context of domination, anthropology being "the outcome of a historical process which has made the larger part of mankind subservient to the other." This quote from Lévi-Strauss (1966: 124) illustrates that since the 1960s, there has been no illusion that the historical relationship between anthropology and its subject matter was anything but inequitable and domineering. Yet, this awareness has not kept anthropologists from continuing their own work back then, as is the case now.
- (ii) The second sin relates to field researchers. Being very few in number, until the mid century, anthropologists took "ownership" over the places and regions they studied, giving rise to area studies fraught with exoticism. It is in this context that "Americanists," "Africanists," and experts in the Pacific Islands or in Melanesia appeared on the scene. The further combination of these geographical areas with topics such as kinship, religion, law, and economics, besides fragmenting anthropology, made it almost impossible to replicate experts. As a result, each anthropologist became an institution unto him or herself, in many cases inhibiting further fieldwork in their areas of specialization.
- (iii) "Salvage anthropology" was another sin. Acting like archaeologists gathering live debris, it was anthropology's task to rescue and store, for the enlightenment of future generations, remnants of "primitive" cultures and artifacts facing inevitable extinction. From this perspective, the anthropologist would go to areas of the world being conquered by Western mores with the "mission" of rescuing and bringing back the "evidence" of different (and oftentimes *previous*) forms of social life.

There was a special urgency related to the task, since whole cultures and societies were disappearing in the blink of an eye.

- (iv) Last, but not least, we have the problem of funding. Here the misdeed refers to the lack of ethical principles in accepting labeled money. A good example was the support of the Rockefeller Memorial during the 1930s to provide the bulk of grants for research and fellowships to the London School of Economics. The goal of training experts who would later dominate African anthropology carried a price tag: the enlightenment of administrators and officers working for imperial regimes. (Although this pragmatic use has been contested as an unfulfilled goal, the experience remains.)

Today's Western guilt is a political statement deriving from recent awareness of power relations inherent in fieldwork. Alternative proposals have been put forward during the past decades, including outlines to recreate anthropology, attempts to bring anthropology home, ideas for new ethnographic experiments, concerns with writing (and with sites and audiences), and invitations to foreign (sometimes considered "indigenous") professionals to discuss the discipline. In short, since the 1970s, anthropologists have been immersed in self-reflection and a quest for new awareness.<sup>2</sup>

In Brazil, things materialize in a different way. Although we perceive ourselves as part of the West, we do not assume that anthropology's past is essentially a sinful one. Of course, when the centers put anthropology's flaws on display, this trend echoes in Brazil and elsewhere.<sup>3</sup> But the general idea is that, if sins exist, they are relatively distant, faraway experiences, committed elsewhere, in the past, and by other anthropologists. If there is no room here for sins, then there is no space for guilt either. In relation to the points raised above, for instance, in Brazil (i) otherness has been predominantly found within the limits of the country; (ii) research by a group of ethnographers has been quite common, especially in the case of Indian populations; (iii) salvage anthropology was never an issue—rather the study of "contact" between Indian and local populations was considered more relevant than preserving intact cultures; (iv) funds for research have come mainly from state agencies for advanced research. In looking at the history of anthropology, emphasis goes primarily to *theoretical history*, i.e., the past as a spiral movement of production, the probing and expansion of inquiries, and the questionings and problems deemed to be "anthropological." In such an endeavor, history is not judgmental, its character is not presentist, the past is not to be condemned by today's standards. Rather, the past is seen through the insights it generated and, as a living force, is brought back as values and principles.

## VALUES

One may read the history of anthropology in many ways.<sup>4</sup> One way is to look for past sins. Another is to search for values, and perhaps virtues. In the latter mode, values are detected mostly in the sociogenetic moment when anthropology became socially recognized and accepted as a discipline, i.e., the first half of the twentieth century. I list some of them in a candid way:

- (i) One important aspect of the anthropological enterprise from its beginnings was to acknowledge the diversity of cultures, societies, and peoples along with the “psychic unity of mankind.” Caught in the challenge of combining these apparently polar goals, anthropologists did fieldwork in remote parts of the world, in which they had to become competent in the natives’ language—fieldwork was an encounter that was supposed to last a long time (at least two years). Initially conceived as research on how “primitives” lived, successive fieldwork experiences ended up conveying to anthropologists that these peoples had different, but equivalent, categories or domains of social life. Comparison has thus always been at the heart of the anthropological enterprise, whether implicit or explicit.
- (ii) The confrontation between Western categories and a different but equivalent phenomenon had one simple result: the West became “just one case” in the whole human experience. A form of relativism prevailed. From this perspective, anthropologists neither judged their subjects nor defined what was best for them—empathy was the order of the day, and priority for “the native’s point of view” was mandatory. Whether they encountered witchcraft, head-hunting, peculiar forms of marriage or any other phenomena inimical to Western mores, understanding in context was the ethnographer’s task.
- (iii) A byproduct of this project was that Western fields of knowledge, which by that time were in the process of being consolidated (economics, sociology, law, psychology), came to produce an array of subfields, such as “legal anthropology,” “economic anthropology,” “social anthropology,” “psychological anthropology,” “anthropology of religion,” indicating that the discipline could respond to different areas of inquiry. (Though both relativism and subfields have been under criticism in the past decades, their sheer existence at one point in time is inevitably part of our present understanding of the world.)
- (iv) Another point relates to the nation-state. While nation-states were also being transformed into the model of the true “world culture of the times” (Dumont 1994: 14), anthropologists did not study national units;

anthropologists were studying “peoples,” “cultures,” “societies,” “tribes” *situated* in nation-states, but not nation-states *per se*. Originated from nation-states—and anthropology being one of their offspring—anthropologists were interested in different units and milieus: the Trobrianders, Talensi, Zande, Tikopia, Maku, Bororo, Xavante, and so on.

- (v) Generally these units were smaller than nation-states—but not always so. Oftentimes anthropologists found themselves crossing national borders, either because “their” group did so and/or because other experts’ findings matched or combined with their own in a specific region. (Of course, Leach’s *Political Systems of Highland Burma* was the classic study in this direction, contesting the concept of “tribe” and forcefully denying that the boundaries of society and the boundaries of culture should be treated as coincident—an important lesson to this day.) The anthropologists’ cosmology was thus of a world made out of “areas,” and not of countries or nation-states.<sup>5</sup>

## IN BRAZIL

Values often produce an inspirational scenario; in Brazil anthropology’s thrill exceeds its possible past sins. Sins, if there were any, are not part of our present day; they are allowed to rest. In this context, yesterday’s exoticism and today’s guilt—the main grounds for the sense of crisis in the field—are locally “acculturated”: exoticism becomes (familiar) “difference,” while guilt is stopped in its tracks by the ambience of political commitment towards those under study. Against that backdrop, I will bring up a few of the aspects that deserve highlighting:

- i. Except for its Indian populations, Brazil has hardly attracted the attention of metropolitan anthropologists. As a result, it has never experienced that historical outrage of those who have been the object of anthropological curiosity by metropolitan centers, as was the case in the first half of the century with Melanesia, South and Southeast Asia, and Africa. It is well known, for instance, that Lévi-Strauss was only interested in isolated Indian populations and not in the country as a whole. Until very recently, Brazilian anthropologists would rarely do fieldwork outside the country’s territorial boundaries.

*In brief: colonialism’s sins were all far away; no resentment or guilt is in sight.*

- ii. Anthropology in Brazil was institutionalized as a social science in the 1930s, along with sociology. At that time, the social sciences were expected

to devise a better future for the country as part of a movement towards modernization. They should enlighten (or even help create) a modern political elite, and identify relevant topics for investigation. But part of this grand modernization project was also represented by a timeless quest for theoretical excellence—which would then make the social sciences in Brazil attain the same level as Europe, for instance. Ever since, an aspiration for quality plus a political “mission” became a strong component of social scientists’ self-identity. In this context, sociologists (and not the usual cohort of archaeologists, biological anthropologists, linguists of the center) have been anthropologists’ long-established contenders for theoretical accomplishments and political relevance, particularly since the 1950s, when sociology’s theoretical accomplishments received full recognition. For the following two decades, up until the 1970s, sociology was the hegemonic field in the social sciences, with anthropology representing a kind of Eve’s rib.<sup>6</sup>

*In brief: Anthropologists outwardly, at home sociologists are their alter ego.*

- iii. A *sui generis* picture emerges: while for sociologists a long term agenda has always involved the study of oppressed sectors of the population, guided by an implicit project for change and development, anthropologists have focused on differences and their political commitment leads them to defend those studied (in particular from the state’s domination). Anthropologists thus profited from the freedom allowed by the discipline’s tradition of separating “peoples” from the “nation-state” (but only partially; more later). As sociologists thus work within the parameters of a macro-sociological or historical perspective, anthropologists work with “the natives’ point of view”—a byproduct of the strong imprint left by relativism.<sup>7</sup>

*In brief: Acculturated as difference, exoticism’s negative bend is replaced by a (positive) scrutiny of the native’s point of view.*

- iv. Fieldwork has been regularly undertaken at home (though the expression “anthropology at home” is not used), following a configuration of different projects amongst which we may distinguish, though not exclusively, attempts at a more “radical” otherness, the study of “contact” with otherness, “nearby” otherness, and a radicalization of “us.” (More on these ideal types, soon.) Even indigenous peoples—the prototype of a “radical alterity”—were investigated within the boundaries of the national territory. This situation reveals less a problem of funding—although this aspect needs to be considered—than the choice of an object of study which includes, or is mixed with, a concern over differences. It can certainly be argued that indigenous groups represented the “available exoticism” in Brazil, but since otherness was not predominately radical, the demand for



theoretical excellence took hands with the moral force that defines the social sciences as dominated by (Weberian) “interested” knowledge.

*In brief: Otherness assumes relative undertones and is directed to social and cultural aspects.*

- v. The emphasis on difference and alterity may be related to the dominant influence of a French perspective (over a German one, for instance). Playing down a strict interest in peculiarities or singularities (the basis for exoticism, for that matter), the predominant interest has been to study different “others” within a totality represented by Brazil.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, Brazil is the ultimate ideological reference. Social responsibility is fundamental, but the idea that prevails is that knowledge of different viewpoints, especially the viewpoints of (whatever) “natives,” amounts to a strong enough political statement. Moreover, in contrast to contexts where anthropology today becomes a “voice” (see Fischer 2003), anthropology in Brazil is a field (as sociology used to be for Durkheim) and a discipline, whose social recognition has increased in recent decades. (One is tempted to say that, in Brazil, anthropology stands for the modern values of individualism and universalism, and respect for differences.)

*In brief: While the sociologists’ main “mission” is represented by projects of change and development, the anthropologists’ task is primarily based on the understanding of differences (even when mostly within the nation-state).<sup>9</sup>*

## ALTERITIES (IN THE PLURAL)

For a brief overview of what has been produced in Brazil under the label of anthropology, I propose to identify four ideal types: “radical alterity” involves the study of indigenous peoples, but also of peoples abroad (both are territorially distant); “contact with alterity” focuses on the relationship between the indigenous with local populations; a sort of “nearby alterity” is represented by urban studies; “minimal alterity” refers to the investigations in the social sciences themselves. Ideal types are models in relation to which empirical examples can be measured in order to elucidate some of their relevant characteristics.<sup>10</sup>

*Radical alterity.* In contrast to canonical fieldwork overseas, “radical” alterity in Brazil has never been far-reaching. A first case is the classic study of indigenous populations located within the geographical limits of the country; a second one is represented by the more recent project of going beyond Brazil’s territorial limits. While ethnological fieldwork is well established in the country and has produced a considerable amount of literature on Tupi

and Gê Indian groups, for example, fieldwork abroad is more recent and takes researchers to the United States, looking for immigrants, or else to Africa or Asia, in search for fellow Portuguese-speaking peoples, once colonial subjects of Portugal (such as Mozambique, Cape Verde Islands, Guinea Bissau, East Timor). In both cases, an ideological link to Brazil is in order; there is no “free” otherness, indeed no exoticism in sight.<sup>11</sup>

*Contact with alterity.* Contact between Indian groups and regional populations became a legitimate academic concern during the 1950s and 1960s, particularly after the introduction of the notion of “inter-ethnic friction.” This concept resulted from a bricolage of indigenist concerns and sociological theory, revealing “a situation in which two groups are dialectically put together by their opposing interests.”<sup>12</sup> Inter-ethnic friction was proposed in a context where the theories of contact, both British (Malinowski) and American (Redfield, Linton, and Herskovitz), had proven inadequate. This hybrid combination became the basis for many long term projects, and it proved fundamental in the consolidation of several graduate programs in the country.<sup>13</sup>

*Nearby alterity.* Since the 1970s, anthropologists in Brazil have carried on research in large cities, making urban studies a case of “nearby alterity.” Given that the teaching of anthropology is part of the social sciences curriculum, it is common for anthropology to become a counterpoint to sociology. Under the political authoritarianism of the 1960s, anthropology was seen by many as an alternative to challenges coming from sociology, in a more or less silent dialogue that has persisted ever since. The attraction to anthropology rested both on its qualitative approach and on the promise of answers to understand both the country’s diversity and, eventually, its ideological unity. Topics of interest range from immigrants to race relations; religion, messianism and Afro-Brazilian cults; popular festivities; kinship and family; party politics; violence; peasants and industrial workers; workers’ unions, etc.<sup>14</sup>

*Us as others.* Since the early 1980s, the study of the social sciences themselves has become a distinct field of inquiry. In general, these studies propose to understand science as a form of modernity, with topics ranging from historical contexts to biographies of social scientists and investigations into classical (European) sociological authors. (Apparently it is here that recent movement at self-reflection finds shelter in Brazil.) Trends such as the “anthropology of anthropology,” “ethnography of anthropology” and “history of anthropology” live side by side, as do studies on the teaching of anthropology. A comparative perspective with Europe is often implicit, thus prompting the difficult question of the audience for whom they are intended, and consequently, of the language of enunciation, given that Portuguese is not a

world language. Of course, simple translations are not satisfactory given the different audiences being sought.<sup>15</sup>

### CONCLUDING REMARKS: "NATIONAL ANTHROPOLOGIES"?

In recent decades, references abound to "national anthropologies." Although this is not a well-defined term, academic common sense has it that this expression refers to the discipline as developed in non-Western, or "peripheral," countries. Recent international conferences (such as the EASA conference in September 2004, for instance) have added to this recognition in many panels.

Over two decades ago, Gerholm and Hannerz edited a special issue of *Ethnos* dedicated to "The Shaping of National Anthropologies" (1982). For the organizers, the important divide was between an "international" anthropology, comprised by American, British, and French disciplines, and "an archipelago of large and small islands" in the periphery, where "national anthropologies" are found. The idea of "national anthropologies" seems to have caught on since then. Recently, in discussing alternative styles for fieldwork, Gupta and Ferguson (1997) found them "in strong and long-established 'national' traditions as those of Mexico, Brazil, Germany, Russia, or India" (1997: 27); similarly Clifford (1997) suggested that traditional fieldwork would certainly maintain its prestige, but that the discipline might come "to resemble more closely the 'national' anthropologies of many European and non-western countries, with short, repeated visits the norm" (1997: 90).

In this context, I close this essay with two brief comments, one on the "national" component of the expression, and the other on the plurality of "anthropologies."

First, "*national anthropologies*" seems to denote a residual category, for those not included in the "international" mainland. To gloss over possible negative overtones, adjectives like "strong" and "long-established" may be used. It is true that, historically, anthropology's development (as with other sciences of the social) coincided with the formation of European nation-states, a process which has always allowed the ideology of nation-building in its many forms to become if not an exclusive, then at least a powerful parameter for the characterization of these sciences. The expansion of anthropology, however, also coincided with the building of empires, a fact that poses serious problems for former and present hegemonic powers as to how to deal with the troubling question of whether anthropology may survive in a post-colonial era (and, for many, a post-nation-building era as well). In this scenario, either *all* possible manifestations of the discipline are (or were) in

some sense “national,” or we should add the label “imperial anthropologies” to contrast to the “national” breeds.<sup>16</sup> Granting that no explanatory value is attached to any of them, perhaps we should recall that anthropologists do have a place in the world. Fortunately, though, wherever social theory is socially produced, it is relatively autonomous from its immediate contexts of production and therefore capable of attaining desirable levels of communication.

Second, “national *anthropologies*” suggests that there are as many “anthropologies” as the contexts in which they develop. What, then, is left of the universalist promise of anthropology, in which comparison is a major stanchion and source? It is a fact that anthropology manifests itself in many versions, varieties, and contexts. Its multiplicity, however, does not deny its universality; the awareness of its multiplicity just makes self-reflection and communication more complex. The picture of the three “others” with whom we must converse, i.e., our immediate peers of the same local community (be they fellow anthropologists, historians, literary critics, sociologists), the peoples studied (whether overseas or just across the hall), and the colleagues from other traditions and other places, past and present, is not new. Rather, it is in this context that anthropological theory—this rich and always open-ended outcome of successive fieldwork experiences which contest both common sense notions and previous theories—stands in the role of a (Peircean) Third: a full convention to allow dialogues across cultures to be in fact between equals (we all have the same monographs in our private libraries; field anecdotes are socially shared; similar ethnographical stories are used as productive metaphors). Why not value among ourselves what we grant all natives? We may breathe in the idea of comparison beneath a universal umbrella, in which different manifestations of our own discipline are rich examples of diversity. Anthropology is one and many.

## NOTES

\* This paper was written as a communication to the panel “Other Anthropologies: Regional perspectives on transnationalism and globalisation,” organized by Aleksandar Bošković at the EASA Conference in Vienna, 2004. I want to thank Sasha for the invitation. I am indebted to Antonádia Borges for a keen reading and for excellent suggestions.

1. See, for instance, Lévi-Strauss (1961) and Goody (1966).

2. See Peirano (1998). Latour (1996: 1) comments: “It is a strange fact that, exactly when the discipline reaches the peak of its power—having overcome the period when cultures of the world were robust and vigorous and anthropology weak or barely existing, and the following one in which anthropology had gathered momentum (chairs, journals, field sites, endowments) but traditional cultures

- weakened and began to disappear—guilt-ridden anthropologists began to denigrate their own achievements in postmodernist vogues.”
3. Barth (1996: 1) comments: “American cultural anthropology today dominates the international scene, both in mass and quality, and is largely trend-setting for what we all try to do.”
  4. On different approaches to the history of anthropology, see Peirano (2004), for a comparison between the historiography of anthropology, an “anthropology of anthropology,” and “theoretical history”.
  5. Thus, for instance, groups could be put together in ecological/sociological areas such as “lowland South American Indians” or “Amazon region Indians”—but *not* “Brazilian Indians,” or “Colombian Indians.”
  6. See Peirano (1981) for an attempt at developing an “anthropology of anthropology” using social sciences in Brazil as a case study.
  7. As a result, to this day sociologists see anthropologists as “soft” empiricist social scientists, less socially and politically committed, less methodologically rigorous, interested in peculiar differences, and always content with their discipline. On the other hand, anthropologists censure their colleagues for their hidden agenda about “how things ought to be.”
  8. The significance of Durkheim’s sociological project for anthropology in Brazil may be succinctly recognized in the opening paragraphs of *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, where the author explicitly denies that curiosity about mere exoticism is appropriate by affirming that sociology did not intend to study a very archaic religion “just for the pleasure of recounting its oddities and singularities.” Durkheim emphasizes that sociology’s goal is first and foremost to explain a current reality, “something close to us and consequently capable of affecting our ideas and actions.” It is no coincidence that many anthropological studies in Brazil contain the term “sociology” in their titles. (See, for instance, Cardoso de Oliveira 1978; DaMatta 1981).
  9. At a time when the social sciences are concerned with “methodological nationalism” (Beck 2004), anthropologists may feel exempt from these entrapments—anthropology studies groups, societies and tribes, not nation-states. Indeed, it may study “ideologies” of nation-states. See Peirano (1992).
  10. For a comprehensive bibliography according to the four ideal types outlined here, see Peirano (in press).
  11. See Viveiros de Castro (1999).
  12. See Cardoso de Oliveira (1963).
  13. See Pacheco de Oliveira (1998).
  14. See Velho (1994); DeMatta (1981); Fry (2005).
  15. Good translations, such as Viveiros de Castro (1992) and Vianna (1999), required the help of anthropologists themselves (Catherine Howard for Viveiros de Castro, John Charles Chasteen for Vianna).
  16. It goes without saying, for instance, that Africa could be considered “home” to the British, who exported the idea of totality to their colonies in the early twentieth century, leaving England itself critically unquestioned by its frail sociology.

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