Symmetrical Dialogues and Dialogical Partnerships

Luís R Cardoso de Oliveira
U Brasilia

When my book on “Legal Right and Moral Insult” (LRMI) was translated into French (Droit legal et insulte morale—Dilemmes de la citoyenneté au Brésil, au Québec et aux États-Unis, 2005) and I was invited to present it in France, during my stay as a visiting scholar at the Maison des sciences de l’homme, in Paris in 2006, I realized that it conveyed a different interpretive stance that I should emphasize, and which I would like to debate. It is a comparative book, resulting of fieldwork in Brazil, Canada and the US. Different from the dominant pattern found in the works of Brazilianists, my book had a clear commitment to exchanging ideas and interpretations with local social scientists and intellectuals.

In this sense, the book conveys a more general and current approach within Brazilian anthropology, clearly present in the ethnographies based on fieldwork done overseas: the interest in establishing symmetrical dialogues with local groups of intellectuals and social scientists. That is, LRMI portrays a clear engagement and an open interest in the exchange of perspectives with Canadian and US colleagues, and, contrariwise to the orientation prevailing in ethnographies of most Brazilianists, it does not limit itself to the mere exchange of data. Even the definition of the research object brought up the concern with establishing significant connections with problems and questions that are meaningful to the community of local social scientists.

Differently to the dominant pattern in the so called central Anthropologies, whose schools—the US, British, and French—were the main driving forces in the history of the discipline, and in which the study of distant societies was focused on and directed to providing a better understanding to the researcher’s society about ways of being encountered overseas, the privileged stance taken up in LRMI aimed at unveiling other forms of life and world views in connection with critical reflections on the researcher’s own society.

I have had many opportunities to approach this subject in presentations to diverse communities of researchers within and outside of Brazil, in events focused on the conditions of dialogue among communities of anthropologists, and aiming at stimulating a broader and more inclusive universe of discourse. As I indicated in these occasions Brazilian anthropology seems to have a preference for two modalities of dialogue: (1) symmetric comparisons, and (2) dialogical partnerships (see www.vibrant.org.br/downloads/v5n2_oliveira.pdf).

Both modalities highlight the exchange of perspectives or of interpretive versions between researchers and between anthropological communities. In fact, the concern with articulating the problems that orient research with questions that are significant to the researchers of the communities with which one establishes the interlocution is present in the two modalities. But, whereas in the first case the core idea is that of reciprocal elucidation, in the second case the focus is on the dialogue between researchers belonging to at least two national communities of anthropologists, who have in common as object of analysis just one society or empirical situation.

At any rate, mine is an attempt of building an analytic-descriptive classification, which should not be reified. Thus, if the symmetry of comparison can be relativized when the second unity of analysis is taken just as a counterpoint, the dialogical partnerships can also involve some degree of comparison; for instance, when one brings up ethnographic examples from other places to highlight significant aspects of the case in point. However, in no circumstances the exchange of perspectives could give up the ideal of symmetry in dialogue. To a certain extent such a perspective can be seen as a radicalization of the fusion of horizons that is present in any ethnographic account, in the sense that the researcher makes an effort to give the same analytic weight (usually given to her own tradition) to the views and interpretive stance of local intellectuals and social scientists.

Beyond the potential impact of this style of dialogue for the Brazilian community of anthropologists and its interlocutors, concerning the amplification of the interpretive horizon of the respective ethnographies, the results of such an orientation can also contribute to the enhancement of the conceptual frameworks of the discipline at large.

Setha Low and Gustavo Lins Ribeiro are contributing editors of World Anthropologies, the AN column of the AAA Committee on World Anthropologies.

WORLD ANTHROPOLOGIES

Membership!

Renew your AAA membership to receive annual meeting registration discounts and stay current on the latest anthropological research.

www.aaanet.org/membership/join.cfm

WELL DONE, AMY!

AAA congratulates AN Managing Editor Amy Goldenberg on receiving the 2011 Outstanding Achievement Award, presented annually to an exceptional staff member through peer nomination. Amy received this award for “her innovation and creativity in the development of www.anthropology-news.org, and for serving as a role model of thoughtfulness and courtesy towards members and staff.” Amy joined AAA in February 2008 as the newspaper’s production editor and was promoted in November 2010 to managing editor. In the summer of 2011, she became staff liaison to the Global Climate Change Task Force. When she’s not working on AN, she enjoys photography, strategy games and Buffyverse comics.