Responses to ""Other Anthropologies and Anthropology Otherwise": Steps to a World Anthropologies Framework' by Eduardo Restrepo and Arturo Escobar (June, 2005)
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What is This?


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We find great value in most of our colleagues’ comments for moving forward with the discussion on ‘world anthropologies’. Taken together, the commentaries invite us to think further about aspects that remain unclear or incomplete in our proposal; they enable us to enrich our argument, and we are thankful for that. In what follows, we address the main points of the commentaries under several headings.

Diversity and world anthropologies

Most of the commentators share our sense of the importance of considering anthropologies in all of their diversity. This does not mean, however, that world anthropologies (WA) are self-contained entities, with some exerting power over others in any straightforward way. Yamashita, for instance, states that ‘Japanese anthropology has not been an isolated phenomenon, but rather a product of the intersection of various anthropological traditions around the world,’ and Krotz considers anthropology
to be ‘one and diverse’ at the same time. As Degregori puts it, what we find is ‘a hierarchical ladder of invisibilization and subalternization’. The commentaries differ in how they see power operating in this process (and in our argument), with some agreeing on the importance of discursive and institutional practices, others putting the accent on contextual relations of capitalism and world systems, and yet others questioning the validity of allegedly culturalist arguments in our elaboration. In de Pina-Cabral’s view, this culturalist bend led us to see anthropologies as ‘bounded entities that exist independently of each other’.

What these comments suggest to us is that we have failed to explain how we see diversity in and among WA. We are not claiming that there is, on the one hand, an ‘Anthropology’ that would be identified with the UK, France and the USA, and on the other, a diversity of anthropologies, whether hybrid, derivative or self-enclosed, in those other parts of the world where ‘Anthropology’ was transported. We do not believe either that there is a nucleus that defines a shared commonality that would find greater or lesser expression in the anthropologies of the world. Diversity, in our view, is not derived from a transcendental identity, nor do we see anthropologies as trapped in their incommensurability. Anthropological diversity is the result of dialogical or power-mediated interactions. In this respect, we feel that some of our colleagues are reticent to apply to anthropology the critique of essentialism often directed at cultures and identities. As much as we need to provincialize the naturalized expressions of dominant anthropologies (DA), it is important to de-essentialize the conception of anthropology itself. For these reasons, we feel uncomfortable with notions such as ‘secondary’ (segundas) or ‘emergent’ anthropologies as opposed to ‘primary’ or ‘original’ ones, or with assuming that there is a single question that defines Anthropology, such as alterity, in Krotz’s formulation.

Geography and the geopolitics of knowledge

We agree with Krotz that there is a need to elaborate the spatial dimension of the proposal for ‘other anthropologies and anthropology otherwise’ (OA/AO) with greater precision. As he mentions, there is a danger in interpretations of globalization that erase the importance of location in the modern colonial world system, since there continues to be a spatiality of power that is part and parcel of the production of anthropologies worldwide. For him (echoing the classic Geography of Hunger of the early 1950s authored by the Brazilian physician Josué de Castro), there still is a ‘global geopolitics’, despite the fact that borders are more porous, that there is greater mobility and inequalities everywhere, etc. Smith makes a related point by calling for more analyses of the specific articulations of DA with the social relations of the capitalist societies in which such anthropologies reproduce themselves. These are important points – however, we want to
emphasize that we do not see WA in terms of a neutral interconnectivity that might yield a deterritorialized planetary anthropological community. As we all know, the ‘traveling’ of anthropologies and anthropologists does not proceed with the same alacrity and intensity in all directions. The material conditions of mobility (including language) are quite different whether one is talking about ‘emergent economies’ (to use the neo-liberal euphemism) or about locations in the dominant centers. As Degregori adds, the unevenness among locations is repeated even within countries (there are some very pointed examples in many Latin American countries, where anthropology departments in ‘provincial’ capitals are veritable peripheries vis a vis their counterparts in the larger cities – this unevenness might even be repeated between public and elite private universities in the same capital city, e.g., Bogotá).

For us the main point is to be more aware of how the geopolitics of knowledge contributes to structure the terms and conditions of conversability within and among various anthropologies (a principle emphasized by the Latin American modernity/coloniality research program). Notions such as ‘anthropologies of the South’ or ‘peripheral anthropologies’, although a source of insight for us, are not capacious enough to explore the fine threads of power among WA. This is why we prefer such terms as ‘subalternized’ and ‘dominant’ anthropologies. Degregori aims at a similar problematic when he states that WA have to do with power in the political-economic sense of the term (after all, as he says, most instances of ‘anthropology otherwise’ exist in the peripheries) but also in the sense of ‘power imbalances within the global field of anthropology’ and the epistemic differences existing at the margins. In sum, geography matters, but the spatial is only one dimension of WA.

Paradoxes of the argumentation

One of the most pointed remarks is the paradox, stressed particularly by de Pina-Cabral, of the use we make of theories and concepts arising from dominant modalities to advocate for the empowerment of OA/OE. We have already referred to this paradox in passing (p. 101). One could add that publishing in *Critique of Anthropology* is part of the same paradox. By relying on this set of languages, are we not reproducing the dominance we seek to highlight? Are we not going against the pluralization of practices we place at the center of our inquiry? There are several aspects to this concern. One may ask, first, whether a critique of DA in its own terms is utterly irrelevant for the project of OA/OE; in our view, it is not since from the perspective of OA/OE it does not imply a rejection in toto, or from a purely reactive position, of everything related to DA. We tried carefully to skirt around a politics of either *ressentiment* or nativism. The decentering of DA cannot be done only in terms of DA but neither can it be done without
looking at the tensions that inhabit them as much as their conceptual contributions.

Second, it is important to take into account the context of enunciation of our intervention. We wrote our article with the goal of feeding into debates at the interior of DA about the processes indexed by OA/AO. Our goal was (is) to enroll the critical potential of anthropologists working within the confines of DA. These anthropologists are not only located in the USA, France or England, but are in many places of the world. It is in this context of enunciation that we see our critique as appropriate since we see it as opening a space of possibility aimed at certain debates on the relation between DA and subalternized anthropologies, for instance in the USA. The fact that our argumentative strategy (largely based on poststructuralism) has proven controversial is itself a reflection of the lack of homogeneity in DA and that DA can be problematized from other vantage points.

Finally, we reiterate that we are not calling for subalternized anthropologies to ‘strike back’ at DA, trapping them into a sterile dialectic similar to that denounced by Fanon. Our project of OA/AO is intended to transform the terms and conditions of anthropological conversability worldwide; in this we converge with other work on WA (e.g., Ribeiro and Escobar, in press). One contribution to this project is the decentering of dominant canons and practices and their influence in the constitution of many anthropologies around the world (including, of course, the USA, the UK, and France). This is only part of the puzzle, however. Another part is a confrontation of these canons with conceptual, institutional, and tactical strategies arising from subalternized anthropologies. These, and others, are strategies we are trying to foster through the World Anthropologies Network (WAN); at the moment, these include even editorial projects that seek to give greater visibility to anthropologies of the peripheries.

**Criticisms of discursive approaches**

Smith and de Pina-Cabral, although from quite different perspectives, argue that our analysis is incomplete or even mistaken because of a perilous textual reductionism that leaves some crucial aspects unexamined. We agree with Smith that ‘The question that needs to be addressed is why certain issues, projects and explanations gain purchase while others are pushed aside,’ and that this has to do with capitalist social relations. We need to question, however, the divide between, on the one hand, a set of DA that could be explained (textually) in their own terms and, on the other, an ensemble of economic processes and social relations that would be causative of the former. Neither textualist nor materialist reductionism are apt to account for the complexity of relations between one and the other. Smith is right in pushing us to weave these dimensions together
further. Recent analyses of the institutional and external pressures associated with ‘audit cultures’ are good examples of this judicious mix (e.g. Strathern, 2000).

De Pina-Cabral’s comments echo what have become common critiques of the ‘discursive turn’. We can only make a few comments in this regard. First, to assert the discursive construction of social reality is not to grant ontological priority to the discursive over other dimensions of social life; even if some radical discursivist approaches could make this reading plausible (e.g. Laclau and Mouffe, 1985), this is not what is intended. To assert that anthropologies are discursive formations is not to reduce them to a series of free-standing speech acts. Second, for us, post-structuralism – as a social theory based on language and meaning, as distinct from liberal theory and Marxist theory with their respective constructs, e.g., individual and society, and production and labor, respectively – is very different from postmodernism. Poststructuralism is a third theoretical paradigm within the modern Western tradition, not a movement, a period, or a set of sensibilities, as postmodernism could be seen to be. The differences among anthropologies cannot be reduced to the cultural diversity or geographical origin of its practitioners, as de Pina-Cabral implies. A proper account of these differences requires pointing at the epistemic, economic and political contexts of the location of anthropologies in ways that make visible how differences among them are structured as relations of inequality. This is an ever-changing and contradictory process that we attempted to frame in the context of modernity/coloniality, a particular perspective on power and knowledge that does not have anything to do with culturalist naturalization.

The politics of representation: speaking for others?

De Pina-Cabral makes another significant claim: ‘The authors try to speak for us, who remain outside the borders of the present-day imperialist centre, instead of speaking of us.’ For him, not only would we (Restrepo and Escobar) be speaking for ‘them’ (anthropologists outside imperial centers), we would be exoticizing OA/AO. We need to clarify several points in this respect. First, it is not our intention to represent (in the sense of speaking for) any of the anthropologies in which we move (whether dominant or subalternized); we try to identify and interpret relations among anthropologies and anthropologists, without pretending to be the voice for any of them (whether in the USA or Colombia). At most, our argument could be seen as constituting one position within the WAN project (there are others). Second, de Pina-Cabral’s discursive device establishes a clear us/them division based on geographical location (at the center or at the periphery of the current distribution). This distinction allows him to either authorize or disallow certain interpretations (whether his or ours)
throughout his commentary. The result is a curious reversal by which he ends up ‘speaking for us’, while maintaining a division that our article problematizes – certainly we do not assume that anthropologies correspond to national entities, whether in the center or not; on the contrary, we stated clearly that DA (and subalternized anthropologies) can be found in the USA as much as in Portugal, Colombia, or anywhere else. The concrete articulations among them – in concrete local, national, regional, or world frameworks – cannot be ascertained beforehand since it does not arise mechanically from the respective geographical location. There certainly are ‘centrist’ anthropologists in the peripheries, and anthropologists at the center that are as subalternized as those in the peripheries.

By appealing to the notion of OA/OA we wanted to point at the relevance of provincializing DA as a step towards changing the conditions of anthropological conversability. Put differently, we do not imagine OA/OA as anomalies or just playful derivations of an anthropology singularly conceived. OA/OA are not appropriations of a universal discipline that once found its true meaning only in power centers. It is not our intention to appeal to an ‘Other’ (this time to be found at the interior of anthropology itself) in order to ‘improve anthropology’, as in a multi-culturalist or identitarian proposal (this would be to continue with ‘anthropology likewise’, to use Degregori’s term); what Pels says of the liberal sense of anthropological ethics that seems to have become ensconced in DA – that it exemplifies ‘the liberal tendency to neutralize and depoliticize political relationships by constituting the self in isolation from the political interactions in which it necessarily has to operate’ (2000: 156) – could apply to multi-culturalist proposals in anthropology. Our goal is rather to position an intellectual and political project of world anthropologies that builds on a renewed awareness of the covering-up of anthropological plurality. Our proposal is not a call for epistemic apartheid or chauvinistic thirdworldism, but is intended as a contribution to envisioning, with anthropologists from all over the world interested in this broad goal, a more openly plural landscape of world anthropologies.

References