

ARTICLE

Maria Ester de Freitas beyond pioneerism: critique and “Brasilidade” in organization studies

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Abstract

Our objective is to investigate and highlight the contributions of Maria Ester de Freitas to the development of the Brazilian field of Management and Organization Studies (MOS). Ester wrote pioneering work in the development of impacting themes in this field – such as organizational culture, intercultural management, diversity, and moral harassment. This Global South scholar’s approach to such themes was shaped by a peculiar criticism that found an echo amongst Brazilian scholars and practitioners. Ester knew how to produce and reproduce complex and often controversial topics courageously, with intellectual refinement and an impressive cultural repertoire embedded in elements of “*Brasilidade*.” Ester’s main concern was to think about the human condition in organizations and, therefore, to promote the social responsibility of organizations, a concern that continues to demand urgent reflection. Hence, this research question is: in addition to being a pioneer in developing such themes in the Global South, which elements keep Ester’s work relevant today for organization studies in general? We conclude that Ester’s relevance extrapolates the relevance of the topics she addressed, as her academic style is marked by correlating criticism and manifestations of “*Brasilidade*”. This correlation appears in a kind of “*Becoming-Ester*” throughout her texts and speeches, an investigative and provocative posture that invites us to reflect and broaden our horizons when approaching our local realities. Finally, we show that the content and style of Ester’s legacy instigates alternative ways to critically reflect on the human condition in organizations through unconventional and unprejudiced eyes, thus, fostering new approaches to imagining and creating more socially responsible organizations.

Keywords: Maria Ester de Freitas. Brasilidade. Organizational studies.

Maria Ester de Freitas para além do pioneirismo: crítica e “brasilidade” nos estudos organizacionais

Resumo

Nosso objetivo é investigar e destacar as contribuições de Maria Ester de Freitas para o desenvolvimento do campo brasileiro de estudos organizacionais e de gestão. Ester escreveu trabalhos pioneiros no desenvolvimento de temas impactantes nessa área – como cultura organizacional, gestão intercultural, diversidade e assédio moral. O estilo dessa estudiosa do Sul Global em abordar tais temas foi moldado por uma crítica peculiar que encontrou eco entre estudiosos e profissionais brasileiros. Ester soube produzir e reproduzir temas complexos e muitas vezes polêmicos de forma corajosa, com requinte intelectual e um impressionante repertório cultural envolvidos em elementos da “*brasilidade*”. A principal preocupação de Ester foi pensar a condição humana nas organizações e, por isso, promover a responsabilidade social das organizações, preocupação que continua a exigir uma reflexão urgente. Assim, a pergunta que queremos responder é: além de ter sido pioneira no desenvolvimento de tais temas no Sul Global, quais elementos mantêm a obra de Ester relevante hoje para os estudos organizacionais em geral? Concluímos que a relevância de Ester extrapola a relevância dos temas por ela abordados, pois seu estilo acadêmico é marcado por perspectivas críticas e manifestações de “*brasilidade*”. Essa correlação aparece em uma espécie de “*Devir-Ester*”, ao longo de seus textos e falas, consolidando uma postura investigativa e provocativa que nos convida a refletir e ampliar horizontes ao abordar nossas realidades locais. Por fim, mostramos que o conteúdo e o estilo do legado de Ester instigam caminhos alternativos para refletir criticamente sobre a condição humana nas organizações com um olhar não convencional e sem preconceitos, fomentando assim novas abordagens para imaginar e criar organizações mais socialmente responsáveis.

Palavras-chave: Maria Ester de Freitas. Brasilidade. Estudos organizacionais.

Maria Ester de Freitas más allá del pionerismo: crítica y “brasilidad” en los estudios de organización

Resumen

Nuestro objetivo es investigar y resaltar las contribuciones de Maria Ester de Freitas para el desarrollo del campo brasileño de Estudios Organizacionales. Ester escribió obras pioneras en el desarrollo de temas de impacto en esta área, como la cultura organizacional, la gestión intercultural, la diversidad y el acoso moral. El estilo de abordar estos temas de esta académica del Sur global fue moldeado por una crítica peculiar que resonó entre los académicos y profesionales brasileños. Ester supo producir y reproducir valientemente temas complejos y a menudo controvertidos, con refinamiento intelectual y un repertorio cultural impresionante embutido en elementos de la “*brasilidad*”. La principal preocupación de Ester fue pensar la condición humana en las organizaciones y, por tanto, promover la responsabilidad social de las organizaciones, preocupación que sigue exigiendo una reflexión urgente. De esta manera, la pregunta que queremos responder es: además de ser pionera en el desarrollo de tales temas en el Sur global, ¿qué elementos hacen que el trabajo de Ester hoy continúe siendo relevante para los estudios organizacionales en general? Concluimos que la relevancia de Ester va más allá de la relevancia de los temas que aborda, ya que su estilo académico está marcado por relatos críticos y expresiones de “*brasilidad*”. Esta correlación aparece en una especie de “*Devenir-Ester*” a lo largo de sus textos y discursos, una postura indagatoria y provocadora que nos invita a reflexionar y ampliar nuestros horizontes al acercarnos a nuestras realidades locales. Finalmente, mostramos que el contenido y el estilo del legado de Ester instigan formas alternativas para reflexionar críticamente sobre la condición humana en organizaciones con una mirada no convencional y desprejuiciada, fomentando así nuevos enfoques para imaginar y crear organizaciones más socialmente responsables.

Palabras clave: Maria Ester de Freitas. Brasilidad. Estudios organizacionales.

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INTRODUCTION

This provocative essay seeks to do justice to the work of one of the most influential Global South authors that highly impacted the development of Management and Organization Studies (MOS) in Brazil, especially since the 1990s. This is not an easy task, especially due to the authentic and free spirit of Ester. Her bravery and boldness are undisputable, as she inaugurated what were then “marginal” fields within Brazilian MOS, which included: organizational culture, intercultural management, organizational diversity and moral harassment (Freitas, 1991, 2001a, 2015b; Freitas & Motta, 2000). Very often Ester confided to her peers how at first, she sometimes was not taken seriously by peers when deciding to investigate these themes. She described how she was sometimes mocked for using alternative approaches to teaching these topics. Still, she seemed to share a daring laugh while narrating trying episodes (Freitas, 2016b, 2017b), making it clear that such provocations, explained by the sexism and prejudice present in Brazilian MOS and academia, did not affect her drive to explore and disseminate new ideas in unconventional ways.

With this bold and light spirit, Ester proposed new paths and strengthened the dissemination of knowledge on these topics that, until then, were little explored in the Brazilian academia. Throughout the variety of her works, she is consistently concerned with the human condition in organizations and the hope that organizations should act in socially responsible ways. Ester’s intellectual voracity transformed, for the better, the ways in which people are read, understood, and treated by organizations in Brazil. This impact is partially due to the fact that Ester built a unique criticality, which leveraged the impact of her academic production in Brazil, attesting to her contemporaneity in our field (on the meaning of contemporary, see Bispo, 2022).

Both authors who write this essay know Ester personally and have had the chance to bear witness to the breathtaking presence and originality personified in this woman. Although we met her in different contexts, she has taught both of us that one can think differently, use a bold vocabulary, and not necessarily act as society expects. And, above all, one can always dare to change perspectives when examining any given issue. Thus, Ester’s teaching gave us glimpses of a key feature of her works: the pursuit of originality. In this essay we show that throughout her work, there is a sincere willingness to defend her convictions in an unconventional but rigorous manner. Nonetheless, Ester did not confuse rigor with rigidity, burden, or detachment. Quite the opposite, her writings and presence come with doses of lightness and joy, combined with affection and care. Perhaps it is because of all these characteristics that Ester takes us out of our comforting everyday illusions, but without tearing hope apart.

However, Ester’s contemporaneity and impact are not only due to her pioneering spirit and unique personality. Here we argue that it is in this singular critical gaze that we can find the key to understanding her relevance for MOS. Hence our question: In addition to being a pioneer, which elements keep Ester’s work relevant today for organization studies in general? We show that her relevance transcends the relevance of the topics she addressed: she had a peculiar style that combined criticism and elements of “brasildade”, which can teach us alternative ways to critically reflect on the human condition in organizations and, thus, imagine and foster more socially responsible organizations. This correlation appears in a kind of “Becoming-Ester”, a line of flight that runs through her work and invites us to broaden our horizons when approaching any object that awakens our curiosity in a rigorous but untainted way.

Finally, in this essay we use the term Global South because we wish to foster a possible dialogue on how Ester’s work may be relevant to scholars interested in developing alternative epistemologies capable of doing justice to local conditions that are often marginalized. Such marginalization directly affects the production of MOS knowledge. In addition, countries of this region of the world are usually marked by a condition of alterity – an inheritance of colonization processes – that challenges the idea of fixed “identities” and denotes subjectivity as a permanent process of subjectivation that happens in interactions with others, as a subject is affected by and changes in these interactions (for a detailed definition of alterity, see Rolnik, 1995). Furthermore, the Brazilian context has been shaped by an “excess of alterity” (for a detailed definition of this term, Santos, 2007), implied by the heterogeneity and fluidity of identities found within our society that was triggered by the peculiarities of our colonization. This context also implies a hybrid and ambivalent nature that raises extra challenges when re-imagining local responsible managerial practices (see Toivonen & Seremani, 2021; Yousfi, 2021). We show that Ester was extremely skillful and resourceful in portraying the complex conditions of the Brazilian society shaped by such characteristics, therefore making a potential contribution to questioning and rethinking managerial practices in similar contexts within the Global South.

Nonetheless, this question proved to be challenging, as throughout her works Ester routinely refuses labels, amplifies themes rather than “boxing them in”, and finds objectification dehumanizing. Therefore, it would not be possible for us to attempt to objectively and unequivocally determine the totality of her contributions. Therefore, this essay contains doses of imagination – like any interpretation of an author – and here we place ourselves as articulators-provocateurs. Although the entirety of our analysis is grounded on her works, it is not our desire, therefore, to offer a definite or a simply objective and descriptive account to provide answers to the questions we raise. Rather, we offer *possible* readings of her contributions that are shaped by our own experiences and imagination.

In order to achieve the proposed objective and answer our question, in the next topic we go through Ester’s academic trajectory, traversing her texts as an act of co-creation that both emphasizes specific aspects and characteristics, and goes beyond them. Subsequently, we will present evidence of Ester’s main questionings and positioning within Brazilian MOS, how Ester impacted this field with her peculiar critiques and ways of thinking. Finally, we highlight the characteristics of Ester’s work that, as we have argued, explain its contemporaneity.

ACADEMIC TRAJECTORY IN BRIEF: MEMORY AND CONTEXT

“[...] I admit it right away: I like my life as it is, I am proud of the life I built for myself”
(Freitas, 2015a, pp. 284-285).

Understanding how Ester’s contributions became relevant to organization studies requires first understanding her trajectory and the context of her research. We will see that engaging writing, robust theoretical and cultural repertoire, and acumen to investigate untrodden paths have always been hallmarks of Ester’s work. We will also illustrate this with fragments of its trajectory and context which already give us indications of Ester’s originality. We realized that such style was unusual and provocative in our often sexist and authoritarian Brazilian academy.

Maria Ester de Freitas began her academic career in 1985, at the academic master’s degree at FGV EAESP. She started her master’s studies after migrating from a successful career as a consultant in Brasilia. At the same institution, Ester was appointed full professor in 2004 and held this position until her retirement in 2016. During the pursuit of her master’s degree, Ester had already shown her daring side, producing a dissertation, supervised by Carlos Osmar Bertero, on a topic at the time almost unexplored in Brazilian MOS: “Organizational culture: major issues in debate” (Freitas, 1989). From this work, Ester published her first book on the subject (Freitas, 1991). Three decades later, her works on organizational culture are still seminal references in Brazil and continue to appear as highly cited references.

Throughout her trajectory, Ester did not hesitate to address other “marginal” or little explored themes in the field, such as: “Old age as a destiny” (Freitas, 2006a), where she problematized the stigmas linked to aging; women in the 21st century (Freitas, 2006b), where she, through her unique style, addressed issues of sexism; and diversity and sexuality at work (Chanlat, Demeron, Dupuis, & Freitas, 2013; Freitas, 2012, 2013, 2015a, 2016a, 2017a, 2018; Freitas & Dantas, 2011a; Irigaray & Freitas, 2013).

She also showed courage in debating “thorny” issues such as the human impact of organizational restructuring (Freitas, 1999b); moral and sexual harassment at work (Freitas, 1996, 2001b, 2002, 2005, 2007b; Freitas, Heloane, & Barreto, 2008; Rodrigues & Freitas, 2014); and suicide (Freitas, 2011a). She often raised questions regarding the “psychological manipulation” carried out by organizations (Freitas, 2004) that were perceived as forms of oppression; she examined the moral health of organizations (Freitas, 2005); and ethics in dismissals (Freitas, 2006c).

International experiences also marked her trajectory. During her master’s degree studies, she undertook an exchange period in New York. In a teaching appointment, she was part of an institutional project in Belgium. She also completed part of her doctorate and post-doctorate studies in Paris. Such experiences sharpened Ester’s interest in expatriates and intercultural management. Since the 2000s, she has published numerous texts on these topics (Bueno & Freitas, 2015b; Freitas, 2000, 2001, 2005, 2008, 2009a, 2010, 2014; Freitas & Dantas, 2014b; Irigaray & Freitas, 2014).

During her doctorate studies, with her title obtained in 1997 under the supervision of Fernando Prestes Motta – a prominent Brazilian scholar in MOS, Ester immersed herself in studies on Freud and psychoanalysis (Freitas, 1997a). The seriousness with which she always pursued her readings, research and writing is revealed in the robust reflections seen in the book: “Vida Psíquica e Organizações” (Freitas & Motta, 2000). Furthermore, her approach to ethical, moral, and psychic issues in organizations was strongly influenced by Ester’s immersion in French works, especially those produced by Eugène Enriquez. In the next section we will explore more in-depth extracts and aspects of her work, in an attempt to gain some insight on how Ester impacted Brazilian MOS with her peculiar critiques and ways of thinking.

ESTER’S POSITIONING AND IMPACT ON BRAZILIAN MOS

At this point, the impacts of Ester’s thinking on MOS and the practical life of organizations are revealed in her works when she unveils perverse practices taking place within these spaces. One example that illustrates this can be found in her text entitled “Context, Public Policies and Business Practices in the Treatment of Diversity in Brazil” (Freitas, 2015). Ester pointed out as the guiding question of the article “What has been done in relation to public policies and business practices to deal with diversity in Brazilian society and organizations? (Freitas, 2015b, p. 92). Ester provides the following answer which consolidates the results of her research:

“With regard to the practices of private sector initiatives, with few exceptions, there is no data available to reliably monitor what is *actually being done* in relation to the great amount of what is *said to be done*. Reputable companies, repeatedly well placed in rankings of the best places to work, and multinational companies located all over the globe, do not always set the example that their importance demands. However, to face lasting inequalities, it is necessary to combine public policies with organizational practices, particularly those that design Human Resources guidelines and can break the vicious circle that maintains the monopoly of opportunities among equal groups, the discriminatory mechanisms in selection and performance evaluation processes, the arrangements centered on personal relationships and not merit that are used in promotions or the absence of supports compatible with the human diversity represented in the body of employees” (Freitas, 2015b, p. 127, our emphasis).

This is just an illustration of the strong approaches of the research carried out by Ester and which, consequently, reveals her discursive ability to bring results, weave criticism and point out ways for the transformation of practices within organizations. In general terms, Ester’s collection of works reveals a perceptive and incisive approach to the practical world of organizations. Invariably, Ester’s texts highlight the significant impacts of organizations on individuals. Echoing this view is an initial step towards changes in the ongoing practices within organizational spaces.

In addition, Ester often advocated for the importance of taking practitioners’ views and experiences into account in MOS, which competed with a local academia that was overly preoccupied with theoretical matters (Freitas, 2015a, p. 323). Ester’s work explores these professional experiences by cultivating critical thinking about ongoing practices in organizations. Perhaps, this is one of the most striking features in Ester’s work, as this action expands the space for new contours, approaches and concepts about reflection on organizations, professional experiences, and the transformation of practices in the organizational and work world. Furthermore, we showed how the impact of this work was also made possible by her style of approaching complex and often controversial topics in a courageous way, with intellectual refinement and an impressive cultural repertoire embedded in elements of “brasildade”.

Furthermore, her ongoing relevance in Brazilian MOS is partially due to the fact that we still have a long way to go in challenging oppressive practices and thinking about the human condition in organizations. Her commitment to reflecting on the promotion of social responsibility and her perception that this should be an ongoing effort for future generations of scholars and practitioners can be illustrated by the following passage:

[...] The current contract signed by the companies does not assume any type of responsibility, does not guarantee any type of support, encourages cynicism and escapist and mercenary behavior. Investing in a relationship founded on these bases is to encourage an increasingly immoral and unethical behavior, a complication that we do not need. Companies have or should have a commitment to future generations

not only in terms of the products and services they will offer, but also in terms of the behavior they claim to value. So far, they have not set a good example and must have a heavy “conscience”, which cannot be rescued with just a few sponsored social projects (Freitas, 1999, p. 7).

Her critical tact for addressing core issues experienced by people within organizations, at the same time, advocates that organizations should not be an arena where “anything goes” for profit. In this sense, when addressing the controversial question “For an ethics in dismissal?”, Ester provokes us:

It must be borne in mind that organizations are by nature carnivorous animals, which feed daily on disputes with the competition and on the forces that they are capable of generating internally. [...] Therefore, the only way to achieve respectful organizational behavior is to demonstrate that respect need not be exercised for merit or moral qualities. But because disrespect threatens your objectives, removes the necessary commitment from internal forces, generates demotivation and resentment, deconstructs the firmness of purpose, releases the other from fulfilling his part. It also shows that, obviously, if everyone in a company expects to be betrayed or treated with contempt, there is no reason to believe in the organizational fabric as a protective mesh that deserves care and dedication. It will be the race of those who will betray first (Freitas, 2006, pp. 103-104).

As a result of a serious and strong academic work which promotes the social responsibility of companies, in addition to being a pioneer in developing pioneer themes in the Global South, Ester’s work is still relevant today for organization studies in general. Her relevance transcends the relevance of the topics she addressed. It is in Ester’s authentic writing style that we find the key to understanding her impact and contemporaneity. This peculiar form of criticism is not a “dour” or “heavy” criticism that burdens those who come across it, even when it approaches controversial and difficult topics. We will explore this point more in-depth in the next section.

The contributions of Ester de Freitas reveal a sinuous and restless critical posture that, despite being supported by the most varied theoretical influences, was never comfortable or content with just repeating an author or remaining absolutely faithful to anyone in the gregarious sense of the term. Ester’s academic career also showed us how this style resonated in her mentorship and critique to academia. Ester pointed out that:

Along my journey, I got involved with themes that had no references in Brazil, and I kickstarted some of them [...] some are now integrated into the field and being worked on by many researchers. I see a potential problem for younger colleagues: [...] how can they study new things if no more daring papers are accepted for publication? I hope this is not a factor to discourage you, but to encourage you to shake off the dust and look for new ways out and answers. You can’t do that without paying a price, but I can assure you that even that can be fun (Freitas, 2015a, pp. 321-322).

Ester’s pioneering spirit in addressing critical issues that are so dear to women and, without a doubt, to all people in organizations, had as a backdrop an academic context mostly occupied by men, given that female scientists still suffer from stereotypes and prejudices in the field of academia, with a minority of researchers, even in developed countries (Freitas, 2011b).

After analyzing the 2019-2020 databases of the Coordination for the Improvement of Higher Education Personnel (Capes), Teixeira, Oliveira, Diniz, and Marcondes (2021) also show that 77% of professors in graduate programs in the area of Administration in Brazil are men. Unequal? Male chauvinism? Marks of a time? Ester occupied and made herself heard within an area occupied mostly by men and whose under-representation of women is still something alarming today. The talent and strength of this woman is unquestionable.

We’d also like to highlight that, even though she never explicitly self-identified as a feminist, Ester was concerned with how such oppressive conditions unequally affected women in particular, in a society mainly dominated by men and sexism:

Now, if we have been competent to leave square one and in 100 years conquer inaccessible spaces throughout history; if we have the capacity to occupy schools and universities, holding most diplomas today; if we have had the courage to face sexist and retrograde parents, brothers, husbands, fiancés and boyfriends who discouraged us from going against the current; if we have been daring to challenge the church and other social institutions regarding the domination of our bodies, conquering the right to decide about reproduction and sexual pleasure; if we are recognized holders of communicative and negotiation skills, valued in extremely competitive and aggressive work environments; then how can we explain the apparent incompetence in getting our partners to also be housewives and assume their share in this smallholding? (Freitas, 2013, p. 54).

When writing about the issue of “women at home”, she problematizes the Portuguese expression “dona de casa” that refers to the role of a housewife, though its literal meaning is a “woman owner of the home”. Ester explored the theme from a point of view that summons and provokes, in order to generate reflection on an issue rarely debated: why women can be seen as “*donas de casa*” and men are not assigned this role, “*donos de casa*” (referring to the concept of househusband)? In addition to this focus, there are other sensitive topics discussed by Ester which brought up the harassment suffered by women in the work environment. In one of her reports Ester says:

From 2000 onwards, I became more deeply interested in the phenomenon of violence in the workplace, in particular moral harassment; I had already written in 1996 about sexual harassment in organizations and felt compelled to develop studies on this other form of harassment, so I immersed myself in the works developed by Europeans [...]. I have often been asked why I have not engaged with North American literature on the subject. It is clear to me that what Europeans regard as moral harassment is often understood as part of the more aggressive or assertive model of competition that is dear to American culture. People who work together can spend years provoking, threatening, sabotaging, and humiliating each other, without the company considering that it is co-responsible for it (Freitas, 2015b, pp. 313-314).

CRITICISM AND “BRASILIDADE”: THE CONTEMPORANEITY OF ESTER’S WORK FOR MOS

Although we have seen that Ester dealt with a wide range of themes, there is a common thread that joins content and style, work, and author (person). The themes addressed by Ester are in line with otherness, either by mobilizing matters whose references were absent in Brazil, or by facing penalties from the Brazilian MOS field that favored the publication and dissemination of well-established, “mainstream” themes. Ester imprinted a style of work that combined theoretical application, literary technique, and personality, playing with language and with the richness of words, the richness of Portuguese language and with her impressive cultural repertoire in her texts. Not by chance, she knew how to make content and form merge, in an assertive and mobilizing way. Ester never impoverished (or “boxed”) the issues she debated, on the contrary, she always made clear the existence of the hidden side of these themes, their mysteries, and their incomprehensible faces: what could not be apprehended in their immediate appearance.

In our interpretative reading of her works, we argue that “*brasilidade*” is a fundamental aspect of this style. We define “*brasilidade*” as general characteristics of the Brazilian culture already addressed by many scholars, which despite being caricatured like any generalization, has served to raise reflections on the condition of the Brazilian people and the politics that involve us. Some have been deeply critical of the idea of “*brasilidade*” and how it has been shaped historically (see Bresciani, 2007; Gewehr, 2021; Maciel, 2010). We acknowledge and agree with these critiques to the extent that we believe that there is no single Brazilian identity. However, we do believe that even though we cannot rely on “*brasilidade*” to define a cohesive and singular identity, this notion is still helpful to raise discussions on traits commonly observed in Brazilian culture, and on which contextual forces have shaped such patterns of behaviors. Some authors have been seminal to examine, define and disseminate such general traits (e.g., Euclides da Cunha, Gilberto Freyre, Sérgio Buarque de Holanda, and Paulo Prado) (Ortiz, 2013). The main identified traits are miscegenation or hybridity; sexual excess; plasticity; cordiality and irreverence.

In this section we argue that Ester interpreted and illustrated traits of “brasilidade”, especially in her works on organizational culture/intercultural management (Freitas, 1989, 1991, 1997a, 1997b, 1999a, 2007a) combined with psychoanalysis (Freitas, 1997b); and in providing context to understand workplace harassment in Brazil (Freitas, 2002). Furthermore, the entirety of her works is filled with uses of musical, literary, and other references to manifestations of Brazilian culture and art that express those general traits. Such uses perform an explanatory and an aesthetic function in her texts, keynotes and lectures and shed light on the complexities of thinking organizational practices within this society.

The explanatory function of the uses of “brasilidades” in Ester’s work is justified by the fact that, in order to understand organizational culture, one must also understand the broader set of values of the society where it is situated (Freitas, 1999c, p. 4). This view is also accompanied by a fierce critique of organizations as “rational entities”. Instead, Ester advocates that organizations are symbolic and emotional realms where “the excitement of the pleasure of accomplishment coexists with the anguish of failure. Organizations [...] are fed by emotion, by fantasy, by the ghosts that every human being harbors within themselves.” (Freitas, 1999c, p. 5). Therefore, understanding organizations in the Brazilian context requires building and understanding a “self-image” of the Brazilian society: “This self-image is linked to wanting and loving in that society and not in any other. Societies, peoples, and groups differ according to what they love, hate, want, desire, dream and seek” (Freitas, 1999c, p. 19).

The aesthetic function serves as a complement to the former, as it helps shed light on the complexities of the layers of our society, which Ester explores without resorting to oversimplifications and the mere reproduction of textual clichés. By doing so, Ester appeals to the reader’s emotions, since her words often build a sense of familiarity, as if inviting us to face small portraits of ourselves. Some remarkable examples are:

- I. Ester references “Dona Flor e seus dois maridos” when advocating a Brazilian cultural analysis through an interdisciplinary and dynamic anthropological lens that takes into account our diversity, “which includes gaps, interstices, margins and centers.” In this regard, she advocates for the embracement of our mixed, plastic, and ambiguous society: we have the right not to choose between two competing lenses in order to understand ourselves; for instance, we should keep both despite of the moral judgment we could suffer (Freitas, 2003b, p. 4).
- II. She cites the song “Não existe pecado do lado debaixo do Equador”, by Chico Buarque and Ruy Gerra, to illustrate how the American version of the “politically correct” doesn’t apply to Brazilian workplaces, as she explains that even though Brazilian culture is sexist, it isn’t “puritan”. Therefore, it requires different lenses and approaches to understand, for example, sexual harassment in the workplace and how to fight it (Freitas, 2002, p. 146).
- III. She shows appreciation for Caetano Veloso’s phrase, “People are born to shine”, for translating a desire not only to promote autonomy and platforms where human beings can express and develop their inner interests and desires; more than this, people have the right to exuberance, joy, excitement, and abundance. This explains why Ester posed such fierce critiques to workplace oppression and dehumanization – giving especial attention to academia (Freitas, 2007d) –, and her unwillingness to settle for work that is merely satisfactory: “it is possible to live in a ‘satisfactory mode’, but idleness will be gaining space, boredom sets in, life loses its shine, and we die on installments” (Freitas, 2015a, p. 292).
- IV. The authors remember listening to Ester as she referenced in her lectures a famous quote from Machado de Assis’ towering novel “Dom Casmurro”, where the leading (male) character, Bentinho, describes the gaze of his love interest, Capitu, as a gaze of “Gypsy’s eyes, oblique and sly”. In the same novel, Bentinho refers to her eyes as “eyes with an undertow”, in allusion to undertows at a seashore: because when the tide overflows, it swallows everything in front of it. Ester seemed fascinated by this description and by the character Capitu in particular, who had a particular way of defying sexism and patriarchies in the late 19th century (Assis, 2018). Here we also see how Ester was also interested in understanding seduction, and how Brazilian cultural references were a rich source for her in this sense. Not coincidentally, “seduction” was one of her main metaphors to explain how organizational culture works (Freitas, 1997a).
- V. During her lectures she also used to mention another notorious, seductive, and defying character from Jorge Amado’s famous Novel “Gabriela, cravo e canela” to illustrate some of her points. The romance was published in 1958 and it depicted small coastal town Ilhéus during the 1920s. In this particular region, patriarchalism was especially shaped by “coronelismo” – the dominating politics resulting from the alliance of rural oligarchies and the estate. Under this

politics, women had two roles: satisfying men (sexually and with household chores) and reproducing (Janotti, 1984; Queiroz, 2017). Gabriela was a particularly subversive character, who aspired for freedom. She was an outsider “mulata” who arrived at Ilhéus and, even though she initially occupied a precarious and vulnerable place in that society, she refused to comply with the community’s social norms as she acquired better social status. Throughout the romance, the author depicts a barefooted Gabriela who despised how uncomfortable shoes made her feel, even though her husband insisted on her wearing them (Amado, 2012, p. 182).

- VI. During a keynote, Ester expressed her love for reading and how this could be at times a defying attitude as she grew up. She described an insightful episode from her childhood: “when my brother caught me reading “Lolita” when I was twelve, he abruptly took the book from my hands and hid it on top of the wardrobe. I thought: man, why did he hide it? I went after it, obviously, even though I didn’t quite understand what was going on” (Freitas, 2016b). As she later on remarked in a lecture: the authors and characters we come across in our readings and identify with become part of us, “we read to make sure we are not alone” (Freitas, 2017b).

Aside from her constant references to Brazilian cultural manifestations, we believe that Ester’s take on criticism, as she recognized herself as a critical scholar within organization studies (Freitas, 2016b) was also embedded in “brasildade”, because she understood critique as an exercise of “affection” towards the Other, being inextricably linked to an affectionate encounter with alterity. Therefore, the criticality of Ester’s writing calls us to an exercise of self-reflection, without which this encounter with alterity is impossible. In her works we can see this stance often manifested by her way of approaching thorny issues directly and frankly, without inviting us, however, to a direct confrontation that aims to annihilate an enemy. The “brasildade”, here seen as an exercise of alterity, also emerges from her writings as linked to the flexibility and cunning of the oppressed to resist while precluding a direct confrontation that, at times, could make them succumb or could simply be psychologically unbearable. This “brasildade” also emerges as a possibility of alternative, irreverent and even optimistic forms of resistance.

A classical expression of this irreverent (humorous) but sharp critique shaped by “brasildade” can be found in the concept of “anthropophagy”, which has been pointed out as “the only philosophical concept originally articulated in Brazil” (Garcia, 2020, p. 124). The “Anthropophagic Movement” which coined this concept, proposed an ethics of “consumption” of foreign elements: “[...] this is an irreverent response to the need to not only confront the imposed presence of colonizing cultures, but also affirm the process of hybridization” (Rolnik, 2021, p. 19). In his “Manifesto antropofágico”, Oswaldo de Andrade expresses the spirit of this irreverent but fierce critique:

Against all importers of canned conscience, the palpable existence of life. And the pre-logical mindset that Mr. Levy-Bruhl should study. We want the Caraíba Revolution. Bigger than the French revolution. The unification of all effective revolts in the direction of man [...] without us, Europe would not even have its meager declaration of human rights [...] but it was not crusaders who came. They were fugitives from a civilization that we are eating because we are strong and vengeful like the red-footed tortoise (Andrade, 1978, pp. 13-14).

In Ester’s texts and in public speeches, we often find fierce but humorous critiques. In addition, we also find more subtle and irreverent approaches that operate much more between the lines, in the subtleties, in the cultural expressions (often literary, and musical) of a people, a repertoire that Ester knows how to mobilize with competence throughout all her works. Yet, this aspect of “brasildade” has a bright and a dark side. Why do we need to resort to more indirect forms of resistance? We believe that its dark side is the deeply authoritarian, sexist, and oppressive forces that shape the Brazilian people and our politics, hence the need to resort to alternative forms of resistance in order to be heard or even in order to survive. We believe that Ester recognizes how this dark side has affected us and our capacity to oppose resistance. More specifically, she highlights the absence of a will to claim “historical repairs” from our colonizers (Freitas, 2009a, p. 251).

During that remarkable keynote, Ester also gave us an insight into her take on colonialism as being also applied to an epistemic domain, as she affirms when looking back at her academic career and interests: “I’ve never been too colonized. In the sense of being put into a box and feeling comfortable in there. If there is too much limitation, I start to flounce. It’s part of my nature, I’ve always been like this” (Freitas, 2016b, extract from video recording). Furthermore, she gives another clue to this stance

when she describes “A máquina e a revolta”, by Alba Zaluar (Zaluar, 1985), as an “unforgettable book” (Freitas, 2015a, p. 295). This gives us important clues as to how Ester approached and understood key sociological issues that shape Brazilian society and the need to discuss our particular methodological issues that arise when one wishes to understand it systematically – especially the oppressions the most vulnerable parts of our population suffer, and those oppressions’ multiple layers (e.g., sexism, racism, economical exploitation, colonialism).

Ester’s academic contributions have proved timely, as with the defense and publication of her master’s thesis on Organizational Culture (Freitas, 1989). Its publication emerges in the context of the return of democracy in Brazil. Added to this was the fact that Ester, throughout the 1990s, expanded her studies and publications on topics such as sexual and moral harassment, interculturality and diversity. From the return of democracy to the attempted coup d’état by criminals through violent acts, on January 8th, 2023 (Alves, 2023), we risk saying that Ester’s contributions continue to foster discussions that bring a questioning and denaturalized perspective on Brazil. This is because Brazil has been experiencing major changes in its economic, social, political, cultural, and organizational spheres for a long time (Silva & Freitas, 2016), and Ester’s studies still bring strong perspectives to interpret contemporary Brazil.

Her excellent ability to identify emerging phenomena, contextualizing them with Brazilian particularities, organizations, and organizational practices, makes Ester’s work still reverberate as a crucial reference in the field of Brazilian organization studies. Ester’s work is a timeless portrait of the changes experienced in Brazil, signaling the “temperature” of practices adopted by organizations in this country, and she is a “spokesperson” for the dilemmas experienced by people working within organizations. Therefore, Ester’s works communicate viewpoints from both an academic and a political standpoint.

The “brasilidade” that is present in her work proposes different ways of articulating knowledge and practice. It also proposes to resist even outside direct confrontation, by refusing to submit even to the strongest forms of authoritarianism. This also emerges in Ester’s irreverence and sense of humor – which she also refuses to give up even when confronting harsh realities. Looking into Ester’s work requires engaging with a dynamic and sinuous style, as Ester’s critiques invite us to reflect and to broaden our horizons, never simplifying or “boxing in” the wealth and mysteries of her objects, in a “light” or “irreverent” manner that often avoids “direct” conflict, as an expression of the plasticity that marks “brasilidade”. Ester’s criticism can teach us, in our present world, alternative ways to critically reflect on the human condition in organizations, and thus imagine and foster more socially responsible organizations.

Ester encountered resonance that aligns with her approach, and she has imprinted her own personality on her writing and teaching, which combined rigor and affection and were directed to generations of colleagues and students in the Brazilian MOS arena. Ester provokes, summons, and moves us with her personality. Somehow, we can see ourselves reflected in her texts. But to avoid the fate of Narcissus, who “sees just ugliness except in the mirror” (as in the famous song by Caetano Veloso), Ester does not let us fall in love with this reflection. By mirroring ourselves in what we read, we strip off the ignorance, authoritarianism, prejudice, and conservatism that inhabit our culture (and thus ourselves) in the face of new issues demanding new ways of thinking.

Reflecting on what one reads is a beautiful process that Ester knows how to teach, as it shows us that we are all foreigners; that “brasilidade” itself already denotes alterity. This is because although “brasilidade” gives us traits that help us understand the complexity of our people, it cannot be confused with one single and cohesive identity. Therefore, “Brasilidade” cannot be confused with a Brazilian identity, especially because “identity is a functional myth” (Rolnik, 2006, p. 134). This seems to coincide with Ester’s vision, as she explains that “what makes Brazil Brazil” is our “mixed, ambiguous, intermediary, sinuous, plastic and complex nature” (Freitas, 2003b, p. 3), which cannot be reduced to a single and cohesive national identity.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In this essay, our objective was to investigate and highlight the contributions of Maria Ester de Freitas to the development of the Brazilian field of Management and Organization Studies (MOS) and the contemporaneity of her works. It was possible to show how Ester wrote pioneering works in the development of impacting themes in this field – such as organizational culture, intercultural management, diversity, and moral harassment, across her academic career. This Global South scholar’s style in approaching such themes was shaped by a peculiar criticism that found echo amongst Brazilian scholars and practitioners.

Nonetheless, our interpretation, and the doses of our imagination contained in them, are open to questioning. In fact, we hope that we have been provocative enough to raise questionings surrounding our interpretations – as we believe it would be fruitful to continue the debates surrounding the contributions and the importance of the works of such a remarkable academic in our present days.

Finally, we conclude that Ester addressed mainly marginal topics in an impactful manner, in a sexist and authoritarian scenario. Up until this day, her works remain highly cited within Brazilian MOS. Investigating how she accomplished this remains relevant today. We highlighted how her style, marked by “brasildade” and critique, may partially explain how she managed to be such an impactful academic, as well as her relevance today. This essay tried to provoke readers in this sense, by asserting that we may be in need of this type of critique today in order to develop new agendas within MOS, especially during difficult historical and political times – as we have experienced in recent times in Brazil.

We wish to have provoked readers to imagine alternative forms of critique, and when and how such approach could be embraced in MOS. The “Becoming-Ester” that we glimpse shows us that another criticism is possible in MOS, an optimistic and passionate one, especially in times when political conditions are presented as very harsh, or even unbearable for many. This “Becoming-Ester” translates aspects of her positive and self-affirming image: “I am a vigorous, passionate, vibrant person, and I like the way I am” (Freitas, 2006b). In the conjunction of content and style, of the work and the person, we saw an indomitable way of thinking being traced, always dynamic, and never fully captured. This criticality can be an antidote for our times, especially in Brazil, for bringing the lightness of one of the most beautiful caricatures of our people that Ester personifies so well: her vocation to be happy.

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