

Anthropology in times of intolerance:
challenges facing neoconservatism

Presentation

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Throughout the contemporary world, a new “conservative wave” has been producing diverse social and political impacts and generating new forms of subjectivity and intolerance. What we have seen, in the largest sense, is growing revival of conservatism and intolerance that not only threatens the democratic order and moral values, but – above all else – human rights. The post-WWII period has been a fertile field for international alliances for peace and human rights (Alves, 1994), for the growth of social movements that seek to expand rights, for independence of colonies, and for the growth of narratives that favor democracy. The initial decades of the 21st Century, however, has seen a conservative reaction to all of these things.

Democracies have not been left unscarred in the battle between pro-democracy/pro-human rights narratives and their conservative opponents. If there have been positive transformations on the one hand (with some democracies becoming more inclusive through the conquests made by civil rights and identity politics movements), on the other hand, we can clearly ascertain a retrograde movement that is now taking place (Levitsky e Ziblatt, 2018).

In the global geopolitical context, we can say that these changes coincide with the crisis and decline of social-liberal democracies and are associated with the emergence of neoliberalism as a hegemonic political and economic model. This has also been linked to the ascension of authoritarian regimes and extreme right wing parties throughout the world.

Conservatism, authoritarianism and intolerance are becoming increasingly visible on the world stage. The new conservative wave is associated with the approval of Brexit in England and Donald Trump’s rise to power in the United States in 2016 (Bianchi, 2018). These events were largely made possible through the use of social networks that sought to increase nationalist feelings, seeking to produce the feeling that the Other – those who are different – is threatening. These mobilizations provoked and strengthened xenophobic, homophobic, sexist, racist, and fundamentalist discourses. Fear and hatred were the emotions cultivated in conservative political campaigns in order to consolidate their constituents and gain undecided voters. These discourses not only violate the principles of the rights and fundamental guarantees of democratic states, but also stimulate and feed back into the narrative construction of supposed and potential “enemies” of world governance.

This kind of conservative insurgency has echoed across several countries while manifesting similar tendencies, some of them driven by authoritarian thinking with explicit neofascist references. The new conservative wave already has many fans around the world, such as in Austria, Czechoslovakia, Turkey, Hungary, Italy, Brazil, and other Latin American countries.

Though these social forces identify as conservative (Almeida e Toniol, 2019), they are better understood as “neoconservative” in that they do not just seek the continuity of conservative thinking, but rather struggle to recover and promote old discourses of “morals”, “traditions” and “proper behavior”. This is a new form of organization among conservative forces, which aim to confront and block the recognition of the new social subjects who became widely established and consolidated throughout the world in the period following World War II. Neoconservatives use innovative technologies and digital social networks to reach and seduce potential followers through the employment of psycho-socio-cultural profiles. They thus broaden their political foundations and seek to counteract the expansion of new social subjects and new lifestyles. Ultimately, they seek to undermine democratic achievements and reverse the last half century of civil and social rights victories.

The so-called “right-wing populism” that is one of the facets of neoconservatism needs to address subjectivities in order to reorient them towards “tradition” by inciting fear and hatred towards those who are considered “Others.” In a “mass society” with digital technologies, these subjectivities are directly accessible through digital media on social networks.

Ultimately, the neoconservative movement is a reaction against the democratic achievements and fundamental rights victories that have gained strength since the second half of the last century. Strategically, one of the strengths of this neoconservative offensive has been the spread of narratives constructed as a counterpoint to progressive forces.

What are the challenges for anthropology posed by this neoconservative wave?

Diversity lies at the heart of anthropology as knowledge produced from Otherness, in all its forms of expression: cultural and social, distant and close. Therefore, the anthropologist’s ethical and political commitment to sociocultural plurality constitutes an important reference of anthropological practice, often allying itself with the goals of the groups anthropologists study.

When pro-democratic narratives are hegemonic, anthropological respect for cultural diversity can develop without threats. The positive valuation of cultural diversity and tolerance of differences is a key component of democratic regime, which hold the principles of plurality and divergence as two of its main premises. The social production of the narratives of multiculturalism and interculturality that took place during the second half of the last century strongly contributed to the valorization diversity. Democratic narratives thus do not confront the values of cultural and social diversity present in anthropological practice.

In different contexts of world geopolitics, anthropology has been able to critically position itself in human rights-related situations (An-Na’im, 1991; Wilson, 1997), seeking (as far as possible) to contribute to the understanding of social phenomena related to social inequalities and violence, gender, ethnic, racial, territorial, and religious conflicts based on culturally instituted practices.

Since the end of the second half of the last century, anthropology has been rethinking and expanding its research object and, as a challenge, has embraced the contemporary and its transformations in the production of the social. Thus, anthropology has focused on the emergence of new sociopolitical phenomena that articulate to different changes and temporalities, as a perspective to be taken over by empirical research.

Especially since the 1980s, one of the characteristics that has marked anthropology has been the overcoming of a structural conception of social life. This has been replaced by a perspective in which subjects, in their total social (and not just ethnic) diversity, are seen as the producers of the social and the political, as well as the new meanings attributed to these phenomena.

This dossier is published in this context of debates regarding the challenges anthropology faces in the 21st century in relation to neoconservatism. It aims to reflect upon, deepen discourses regarding, and discuss the challenges presented to anthropology in Brazil in the face of the current neoconservative offensive.

In today's Brazilian political conjuncture, marked by the setback and dismantling of the hitherto existing (but fragile) state of social welfare, anthropology has become vulnerable to frequent attacks aimed at depreciating and disqualifying its scientific production of academic knowledge. In the field of Brazilian anthropology, there is a strong relationship between research and the context from which its practice derives, which has often led many anthropologists to reconcile the production of scientific knowledge with action: that is, with the restitution of their research to the groups they study. This has especially been the case when the groups being studied are the new rights-bearing subjects who emerged on the national scene and who became protagonists of sociopolitical changes in the national public sphere over the past several decades.

The Brazilian Association of Anthropology (ABA) has been strongly in favor of its commitment to defending the rights that preserve, protect, and promote sociocultural diversity, as well as racial and gender equality in Brazil. To this end, it has been regularly promoting activities related to this theme, through its national anthropology meetings, tables, working groups, and forums. In 2017 and 2018, during the two Meetings of the National Association of Postgraduate Studies and Research in Social Sciences (ANPOCS), two Brazilian Symposiums were organized by the Brazilian Association of Anthropology (ABA). They sought to reflect on the ideological attacks of the current government on the work of anthropologists associated with ABA. In 2018, during the 18th International Union of Anthropological and Ethnic Sciences (IUAES), ABA organized several activities, including a special symposium dedicated to the challenges of anthropology in the 21st century. Other similar activities were performed during the 31st Brazilian Anthropology Meeting (RBA), held in December 2018.

The works gathered in the present volume reflect such concerns, having as their guiding thread reflections on different themes and research contexts that are pressing issues facing Brazilian anthropology in the current political context. The *Anthropology in Times of Intolerance* dossier will be published in two parts. The first part, which make available to the reader in this issue of *Vibrant*, is organized as follows:

The opening section, entitled "Debates", aims to engage in a broad discussion about anthropology in the contemporary world and the challenges facing radical change in different research contexts. Ruben Oliven's contribution to the debate discusses some issues facing anthropology in view of its commitment to the rights of the groups it studies and, above all, the theoretical task of offering interpretations of the social phenomena that the world faces. The questions posed by Alejandro Grimson are directed towards thinking of an anthropology that is politically committed to everyday and transformative alterities, made in and thought about from the South, and the commitment of this anthropology to the ideals of a participatory and radical democracy.

The article section includes Lia Zanotta Machado and Antonio Motta's contribution, "Brazilian Anthropology in Times of Intolerance: Challenges in the Face of Neoconservatism". This article analyzes the new context of political confrontation and traces the profile of the current political conjuncture, marked by regression, intolerance, repression and censorship. Indigenous and *Quilombola* territorial rights and rights to sexual and gender diversity are the main targets of regression and censorship, manifest in the particularly anti-indigenous and sexist language employed by many of Brazil's current governing class. In presenting the objective and subjective dilemmas experienced by anthropologists, Machado and Motta propose an intransigent defense of anthropological production and the ethnographic method as a means of avoiding a possible "(social) sacrifice of the intellect" and as a way of counteracting the threat of destitution of the new social subjects, either through the elimination of their territories or lifestyles.

The remaining texts of the Articles section will be available in the next issue of *Vibrant*, in early 2020. The authors' ability to perceive and ways of looking, gathered in this dossier, allow us to peer into a multifaceted field of thematic interests, combining different types of experiences developed in the current political context of Brazil. For the authors, the greatest challenge has been the creation of an emergency anthropology that reflects the dilemmas set forth here. The continuation of this dossier will be published in the next issue of *Vibrant*, addressing other themes related to Brazilian anthropology in times of intolerance and neoconservatism.

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