

## Anthropologies in Brazil: A Short Historical Introduction

Stefania Capone

CNRS/EHESS, CéSor

Fernanda Arêas Peixoto

Universidade de São Paulo

2020

### POUR CITER CET ARTICLE

Capone, Stefania & Fernanda Arêas Peixoto, 2020. "Anthropologies in Brazil:

A Short Historical Introduction", in *Bérose - Encyclopédie internationale des histoires de l'anthropologie*, Paris.

URL Bérose : [article1959.html](http://article1959.html)

BEROSE Publisher: ISSN 2648-2770

© UMR9022 Héritages (CY Cergy Paris Université, CNRS, Ministère de la culture)/DIRI, Direction générale des patrimoines et de l'architecture du Ministère de la culture. (All rights reserved).

Your use of this article indicates your acceptance of the Bérose site ([www.berose.fr](http://www.berose.fr)) terms and conditions of use, available [here](#).

Visited on 24 April 2024 at 18:55

Publié dans le cadre du thème de recherche «Histoire des anthropologies au Brésil», dirigé par Stefania Capone (CNRS, CéSor) et Fernanda Arêas Peixoto (Universidade de São Paulo)

There is great diversity of anthropological practice in Brazil. There is a plurality of themes and ethnographic field sites, issues and theoretical orientations. While Brazilian anthropology is best known for its studies of Amerindian populations and Afro-Brazilian religions, it is not limited to these great traditions of study, but also includes, for example, urban and rural anthropology, among various other subdisciplinary fields. This makes it difficult to encompass the whole at a single glance or to relate it to a single historical trajectory. In order to trace the history of anthropology in Brazil, one could go back to the 'discovery' of the territory later called Brazil and to consider the letter written by Pero Vaz de Caminha to the King of Portugal in 1500. This was the first 'ethnographic' document on the new lands, to which would be added accounts of travellers who passed through the country in the following centuries. But would it not be better to follow the creation of the first scientific institutions in the nineteenth century in order to locate the origins of 'anthropological' research? Or could the focus not be on the universities created later on, in the 1930s, when autonomous disciplines and their respective specializations were more clearly defined?

Far from establishing a unique history of anthropology in Brazil, based on chronological landmarks that are always questionable, this historical introduction suggests rather the existence of ramifications that led to the consolidation of different research traditions, of

plural matrices of thought, of divergent lines across space and time. The first challenge in accounting for this multiple weave is to allow this heterogeneity and complexity to emerge and to use these differences as a compass. The aim here is to sketch out a cartography that respects the regional diversity of a country with various centres of intellectual production, not to say institutional clashes, between museums, institutes, associations and universities. All this should be attempted without neglecting generational gaps and the characteristics of the actors themselves: Brazilians or foreigners, men or women, blacks, whites, mestizos or Amerindians. Any reflection on the history of anthropology in Brazil must take into account the border zones, the circulation of 'scholarly' and 'artistic' knowledge, 'erudite' and 'popular', 'professional' and 'amateur'. These contrasting labels are sometimes to be found at the heart of the anthropological relationship between 'the Observers' and 'the Observed' – two categories that have been increasingly questioned. We also need to be attentive to the ways in which ideas and practices circulate between different disciplinary territories, such as history, sociology, archaeology, literary studies, etc., or even between 'scientific' fields and others more properly defined as 'political'.

In order to restore the complexity of the characters, outcomes and landscapes of anthropologies practised in Brazil, it is important to retrace individual and collective projects and to outline the fields in which they are rooted: Amerindian ethnology; urban anthropology; rural anthropology; the anthropology of Afro-Brazilian populations; the anthropology of religion; legal and political anthropology; science and technology studies; visual anthropology; gender and sexuality studies, among many other varied designations that evolve in accordance with the expansion of research and its theoretical inspirations. One significant change, especially from the 1990s onwards, is the development of research undertaken outside the national territory. This was also made possible by the scientific policy of foreign foundations, such as the Ford Foundation, established in Brazil in 1962, which financed transnational projects, particularly in Africa. Until then, surveys which focused on Brazilian populations and groups had dominated most anthropological research. The focus had been on the 'Other at home', the 'primitives at the heart of the nation', the Amerindian populations or initiates in Afro-Brazilian religions.

Even before the existence of institutional spaces devoted to the training of anthropologists in the strict sense of the term, anthropological knowledge was produced by naturalists, chroniclers, missionaries and painters who travelled throughout Brazil from the 16th century onwards. They were the first to establish and analyse some of the fundamental dimensions of the Brazilian natural landscape, social life and cultural manifestations. Some emblematic works include *Hans Staden's True History: An Account of Cannibal Captivity in Brazil*, by Hans Staden (1557); *History of a Voyage to the Land of Brazil*, by Jean de Léry (1574); *Travels in Brazil*, by Carl Friedrich Philipp von Martius and Johann Baptist von Spix (1823); and *A Picturesque Travel through Brazil*, by Johan Moritz Rugendas (1834). Then there are the folklorists and other learned figures of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, including lawyers, engineers and doctors, such as Raymundo Nina Rodrigues (1862-1906) with his work *The Fetishist Animism of the Negroes of Bahia* (1900) and his heir Arthur Ramos (1903-1949).

The generation of thinkers who produced important essays on the process of formation of the Brazilian nation in the 1920s and 1930s – such as Euclides da Cunha (1866-1909), Paulo da Silva Prado (1869-1943), Francisco José de Oliveira Vianna (1883-1951), Gilberto Freyre (1900-1987) and Sérgio Buarque de Holanda (1902-1982) – profoundly influenced anthropological studies in Brazil and also abroad. Similarly, and despite their roots in other disciplines, figures who from the 1930s studied at the newly-founded Brazilian universities were at the origin of seminal anthropological studies: such is the case of the literary critic Antonio Candido (1918-2017) and the sociologist Florestan Fernandes (1920-1995). In addition, there are also hallowed names from the national literary canon, such as the poets of modernism of 1922, Oswald de Andrade (1890-1954) and Mário de Andrade (1893-1945), who were responsible for original theories on national culture that still bear fruit for contemporary anthropology.

Moreover, Brazil has also been one of the favoured lands for several generations of foreign ethnographers and anthropologists who have sometimes influenced local scholarly practices, such as the German ethnographers Karl von den Steinen (1855-1929) and Curt Nimuendajū (1883-1945), or the French anthropologists Roger Bastide (1898-1974) and Claude Lévi-Strauss (1908-2009).

In addition to the authors and their works, there are various centres for the production of anthropological knowledge which are part of the history of Brazilian anthropology, such as the Museu Nacional (MN-UFRI) in Rio de Janeiro, the Universidade de São Paulo (USP), the Universidade Federal da Bahia (UFBA) or the Universidade Federal de Brasília (UNB), among others. The same applies to the scientific societies that have built up ethnographic collections and organized training courses. Likewise, research missions, conferences and journals allow historians of the discipline to rediscover characters of anthropology and ways of practising it that are now forgotten. This work of analysis of the formation of the anthropological field cannot, of course, dispense with the study of certain connections that precede the institutionalisation of anthropology in Brazil, whether between Brazilian and foreign scholars or between individuals and institutions. The exchanges between Arthur Ramos and Melville Herskovits (1895-1963), in the United States, and the creation of a transnational Afro-Americanist field in the 1930s and 1940s are an example of this history, which is much more 'global' than one might imagine.

Any attempt at intellectual mapping cannot fail to highlight the historical milestones and political events that have influenced the production of knowledge in general and of anthropology in particular, both in terms of its actors and its centres of activity. The dictatorship established by the *Estado Novo* regime from 1937 onwards destroyed the vigorous project of the Universidade do Distrito Federal, created a year earlier in Rio de Janeiro; it also hindered the functioning of institutions in other regions and persecuted community and religious leaders. The democratic winds that blew again in the 1950s, on the contrary, allowed the creation of funding agencies for higher education and research (the two main ones being the Coordenação de Aperfeiçoamento de Pessoal de Nível Superior – CAPES and

the Conselho Nacional de Desenvolvimento Científico e Tecnológico – CNPq, which were founded in 1951). Meetings were also organized under the aegis of the Sociedade Brasileira para o Progresso da Ciência (SBPC, 1948), as was the first Reunião Brasileira de Antropologia (RBA), which was at the origin of the Associação Brasileira de Antropologia (ABA, 1955).

The 1964 coup d'état and the ensuing dictatorial regime in turn restored the atmosphere of prohibition and increased persecution inside and outside universities. This repression intensified after 1968, when several figures, such as the anthropologist Darcy Ribeiro (1922-1997), were deposed and forced into exile. While the deleterious effects of political (and police) violence also affected Indigenous peoples and their protection agencies, the true extent of this will only be seen after the work of the Comissão Nacional da Verdade (National Commission for the Truth), which was established in 2011 to investigate human rights violations committed by the Brazilian state between 1945 and 1988. Today, the political situation which is unfolding in Brazil, with drastic reduction of funding for education and scientific research, poses a new threat to the development of the social and human sciences in Brazil. They are seen as a breeding ground for opponents of the extreme right-wing government of Jair Bolsonaro (2019), whose policies against 'minorities' (particularly Amerindians and Afro-Brazilians) run counter to those pursued by preceding governments.

This makes no allowance for the resilience of anthropology in Brazil. Thus, although the year 1968 was marked by the exacerbation of dictatorial arbitrariness, it also witnessed the strengthening of *pós-graduação*, i.e., graduate and postgraduate studies and training for research in Brazilian universities. New master's and doctoral degrees in anthropology were created, and existing ones were reconfigured. In addition, the large-scale collective research projects set up in the 1970s with the support of international foundations such as the Ford Foundation contributed to the consolidation of this post-graduate training system, as did the creation of the Associação Nacional de Pós-Graduação e Pesquisa em Ciências Sociais (ANPOCS) in 1976. All these factors stimulated national anthropological production by broadening and diversifying it, a broadening that has also led, thanks to Brazilian efforts, to the creation of a worldwide movement that brought together some thirty national professional anthropology associations in a 'global' association, the World Council for Anthropological Associations (WCAA), founded in 2004 in Recife.

In sum, space and time are the parameters of this mapping of anthropologies practised in Brazil, from yesteryear to the present day, which can only be apprehended through their international connections. Making no attempt to provide a real synthesis, this introduction [1] aims to suggest tracks and trajectories, which readers can follow in the order and direction they consider most appropriate, each one being free in turn to create new links and relationships between them.

[1] As well as the other articles published by BEROSE International Encyclopaedia of the Histories of Anthropology as part of the research theme 'Histories of Anthropology in Brazil'.