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What is a devolution?

The circulation of remnants and demonstrations of trust and recognition of indigenous peoples in Brazil

Reading the contents in this blog (the ones I could read, since I don't speak German), it struck me that, while a lot of debates in museums have been organized in terms of repatriation, in Brazil I have often heard a different term: devolution or return. So when I received an invitation to contribute to this debate, I thought a consideration on the theme of devolution could be useful. This text has been assembled from perceptions and interlocutions I have gathered in my present doctoral research, concerning documental collections formed in Brazil by ethnologists who have worked with indigenous peoples since the 1960s. The aspects of anthropological practice I mention here can be considered to apply to anthropology in Brazil as a whole, but in the work developed in other ethnographic contexts there are, as in any relational work, different inflections in the ways devolution is conceived. So as not to extend the text – and expecting that colleagues from other countries might contribute as well – I have restricted this perspective to the Brazilian case.

As a way to start, it is important to remind readers that, in Brazil, more than 300 indigenous peoples speak more than 150 different languages, inhabit different landscapes, and have gone through very different historic trajectories. That means formulations constructed from a comparative point of view should not be considered as a generalization, but as a specific display arranged for the purpose of common reflection and debate. The one which is presented here models a field of discourses and of sentiments raised by the accumulation, disclosure and preservation of artifacts of knowledge made and circulated in the scope of research relations: not only cultural material collections, but also fieldwork documentation, photographs, voice records among other kinds of items. References of texts available in English and French regarding different topics will be inserted in footnotes, for further

reading if one is interested.

A second aspect to be brought upfront is we are talking about a context where researchers, institutions and the collectivities concerned are mostly residents of the same nation-state, and partners in a co-citizenship that has to be continually re-produced, since colonialities, asymmetries and inequality are constantly reposing themselves. This has been done, for generations already, through the engagement of researchers in different arenas of the Brazilian public sphere: in public universities, in state agencies, in very important Brazilian non-governmental organizations, and in all cases, through a systematic participation in the public debate.

Third, and even more important, thanks to the shared efforts of indigenous leadership and the indigenous movement in Brazil, there is a growing participation of indigenous peoples in the spaces where their rights are at stake, and which has been ever more visible in the last two decades, with the establishment of a number of policies for guaranteeing their right to educação diferenciada – specific and local frameworks for basic education – and for affirmative action in the universities. The daily presence of indigenous students in the universities has and is still to propitiate very healthy shifts of perspective, since it increased the accountability and has obliged academic disciplines – and anthropology in its own specific ways – to reconsider their means and objectives in new and deeper dimensions. There is also a growing movement of social museology and of indigenous museums and archives which is an important fruit of alliances between indigenous leadership and thinkers, and academics.[1]

For the sake of length, I will concentrate here on two focal points of the considerations from indigenous thinkers and from ethnologists regarding the preservation and devolution of artifacts that are remnants of times past, and which, I believe, bring an important tension to the meaning of a devolution. Before that, it is useful to explain the use of this vocabulary: the term artifacts is used here as a way

to consider items in different collections as results of processes of knowledge and action which include a series of collaborations between humans and non-humans, indigenous collectivities and individuals, researchers and collaborators, as well as the fact that other products of indigenous knowledge which are not necessarily thought of as items of collections are now subject to similar demands and contestations regarding their preservation and circulation.[2] I am also using the term remnants as a way – which I have learned from these different perspectives – to consider this chain of implications in the production and preservation of artifacts that cannot be extricated from the dimension of time, putting a question mark on the value of the extended preservation of artifacts that were modeled for specific functions in specific time frames.

The first focal point I would like to refer to is a number of considerations which are directly connected to the ideas of remnants and artifacts, and amount to the perspective that keeping remnants cannot be considered to be good per se. The duration of artifacts which act and interact on/with humans in different ways – be them masks, flutes, pots, but also decorative patterns, chants, images, recorded voices of deceased people – makes them subject to specific protocols of transmission, use, and not only memory but amnesia and disintegration, as means of moderating their agencies.[3] Extending their duration suscitates doubts and anxiety, as does the reunion of these artifacts with their places and collectivities of origin, and in concrete cases of devolution there is not only satisfaction and joy in re-encountering something or someone from the past, but also consistent reports of sadness, fear, illness and conflict. In the present days, with more systematic historic work and political topicalization of violences promoted by the Brazilian state in the colonization of the Brazilian hinterlands, the thorough description and reiteration of images and narratives of unspeakable violence, illness and death has acquired specific significance in the repertoire of potentially hostile memories, as sadness is widely considered as a life-risking state.[4]

The other focal point of these considerations is that the most important meaning of the gesture usually described as a devolution refers to the recognition and development – in some cases, improvement – of a relationship extended in time, and this recognition and development can and should be done done through different channels and means of communication, which allow the parts involved to decide whether to keep and to give back remnants, and the best ways to do so. Both of these focal regions have to be considered together in the consideration of what a devolution might mean.

In the period I have been focusing on, from the end of the 1960s, the constitution of collections of artifacts was, as in anthropology worldwide, losing importance in the discipline, even though museums – typically museums of ethnology and archaeology – were also founded in different universities. The works developed around indigenous artifacts (usually in the context of forming collections or documenting previously formed collections), and with the participation of museums of ethnology, have had a specific role in bringing to the first stage the importance and the meanings of beauty in indigenous life, a theme which is very productive for indigenous peoples in ethical, cosmological, political and epistemological ways.[5] The beauty of indigenous artifacts has been an important focal point of indigenous agency in the Brazilian public space as well.[6] The scientific museums which gather indigenous material have an important role in establishing methods, which include the training of indigenous researchers and systematic visits of indigenous collaborators for the documentation and treatment of collections, which are now references for the construction of new ways of doing research. The realization of such collaborative projects regarding collections is a challenge in the present context of cuts in science budgets since the coup on president Dilma Rousseff in 2016. Adequate funding, it might not be redundant to stress this, is vital for the circulation of people and equipment – sometimes across continental distances – and the promotion of activities both in museums and villages, contemplating a sufficient quorum of participants for these activities to be considered somehow

representative.

Considering ethnological investigation more comprehensively, the circulation of material made or gathered in research activities of anthropologists and their collaborators in the context of different anthropological themes has happened for decades, already – and in a reiterative manner – with the generation I have been following more attentively, which starts to work in the end of the 1960s, when post-graduate programs of social anthropology consolidate in Brazil. I very frequently hear anthropologists saying: “this belongs to them”; or “my research was made for them, and for their children and grandchildren”. The devolution of products of research activities, especially photographs, theses and books, is thus an expectation of the researchers themselves, and happens in a continuous flow through people who come and go from the villages, visits, the continuation of fieldwork, the promotion of new activities and materials for cultural promotion and educação diferenciada, and is now intensified with the production of digital materials which circulate through the internet.

This circulation can actually be seen as part of a wider regimen of interaction between anthropologists and their collaborators, which is very consistent among anthropologists in Brazil. A circuit of people, gestures, messages and artifacts coming and going is central to the building of relations based on ethics and trust – understood not only in the terms of an academic discipline but also, and in decisive ways, of the cosmology and the ways of making relations which are current in each group. The knowledge of the kinship networks, of political dynamics, of patterns of knowledge transmission, of etiquette in different situations, and, in the case of museum collections, of the ontological and agentive specificities of artifacts is vital for a proper circulation of remnants and, at the same time, an indication of the quality of relations established, and their potentiality for being extended in time. These relations also consistently involve some kind of engagement in the confrontation of the invasion and colonization of their interlocutors lands, and in the

promotion of communication actions which aim to revert the tendency to the invisibilization of the indigenous situation in Brazil.

In the context of collections, one indication of the quality of this reciprocal knowledge and interaction is found by indigenous observers in the care they perceive to have been dispensed to items of collections. Another is to know what these objects have been used for, and how.[7] A very important one is the openness and willingness of memory institutions to hear and contemplate their counterparts' concerns regarding collections – which, in the case of devolutions, generates specific anxieties among workers of museal institutions, since once collections are formally transformed into public patrimony, there is not a lot of space for changing that status unless a wide network of actors in the state is engaged in an extended bureaucratic process for changing the entitlement of items and collections.

When translated to the debates concerning intellectual property, these figurations of the actual and potential circulation of artifacts also tend to point to the demand by indigenous peoples for recognition of a relationship that has made possible the conformation of the artifacts of knowledge ascribed to their alien/white/urban interlocutors – theses, museum collections, films etc. The activities of anthropologists can, in this context, be displayed as an appropriation of indigenous knowledge that has its own dividends and should be properly recognized through public acknowledgements, as well as the demonstration of a consistent availability for exchange, compensation and commitment. One way in which the shift of focus in public discourse, interpretation and demands from the anthropologists to the indigenous thinkers themselves has happened lately are the interpellations of researchers and of the consistency of their implication and openness with their indigenous collaborators. The establishment of formal protocols of consultation at different communities for the implementation of state policies contemplates previous consultations for the development of research activities. Taking this critical figuration seriously, the engagement of anthropologists in the production of artifacts

other than the ones their own authorship is ascribed to has now an important place among their activities, and – as elsewhere – the complex webs of transmissions of knowledge in indigenous contexts are now the object of common efforts towards models more accurate than those of the author or the public domain.

It is difficult to wrap these considerations in a conclusion and a definition of what a devolution might mean, and I believe this is due to a number of reasons. What is and was taken, and what is being given back are questions that can be responded in very equivocal and conflictive manners. An important one is the sense and sentiment of insecurity we are going through in the latest years regarding the maintenance of a set of indigenous rights that was built with a lot of effort. This, as has recently pointed the indigenous intellectual Ailton Krenak, presents itself as a despairing repetition of the experience of indigenous peoples in Brazil since the colonization of these lands, knowing, in his words, that they can sleep for one night ("only tonight") at a time. Maybe that explains an emphasis of concerns and strategies on the present and on the future, a constant theme in matters of devolution: what will these memories do now for the extension and improvement of a collective and sensible life that lasts more than one night? What is being brought back? What is it worth? Maybe what is being pointed to researchers and institutions in their exchanges and learning with their indigenous collaborators is that the trail to an adequate sense of devolution can be found not only in the memories of the exchanges established by and imposed on each group, but also in their specific visions of possible and desirable futures. A new notion of academic and political rigor, and a regimen of evidencing trust will have to emerge from the criteria of what kind of future is being produced by present relations established through the giving and taking of these kinds of gifts.

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[1] In 2017, the Indigenous Network of Memory and Social Museology in Brazil has organized its 3rd Forum in the Northeastern state of Piauí. The Kuahí Museum in Oiapoque is a case more systematically treated in bibliography, among others that start to multiply. See Lux Vidal's "Kuahí: the indians of the Lower Oiapoque and their museum" (Vibrant: Virtual Brazilian Anthropology 10.1, 2013).

[2] The modeling of this network, in indigenous terms, frequently gravitates around a modeling of ownership which has been examined by Carlos Fausto in the inescapable article "Too Many Owners: Mastery and Ownership in Amazonia." (in: Animism in Rainforest and Tundra: Personhood, Animals, Plants and Things in Contemporary Amazonia and Siberia, edited by Marc Brightman et al., 1st ed., Berghahn Books, 2014, JTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt9qctxb.8).The work of Els Lagrou, « Le graphisme sur les corps amérindiens », Gradhiva, 13 | 2011, URL : http://journals.openedition.org/gradhiva/2040, can be considered as a focal point for further exploration on this topic. For a case in the verbal arts, as to consider how wide the scope of this reflection can be, see the work of Pedro de Niemeyer Cesarino, « Entre la parole et l'image : le système mythopoétique marubo », Journal de la société des américanistes, 97-1 | 2011. URL : http://journals.openedition.org/jsa/11739 ; DOI : 10.4000/jsa.11739

[3] This theme has extensively been worked on by Brazilian ethnographers. Dominique Gallois's work is central for the consideration of the many implications of these circuits of transmition. Anthony Seeger, who has worked with the Suyá in Brazil, also has many texts considering matters, especially regarding indigenous music and its circulation.

[4] This topicalization has happened in the context of the Comission of Truth established by President Dilma Roussef to scrutinize state violence in Brazil between 1946 and 1988. The research done in this context led to the emergence of a 7000-page government report made in 1967 that had disappeared in bureaucratic archives. The consequences of this emergence and adequate consideration of the content of the report are still to be seen and worked on.

[5] An important moment in this reflexion is Lux Vidal's "Contribution to the concept of person and self in lowland South American societies: body painting among the Kayapo-Xikrin." Dispositio, vol. 6, no. 17/18, 1981, pp. 169–181. JSTOR, JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/41491219.

[6] Lucia Van Velthem's text ""Objets de mémoire": Indiens, collections et musées au Brésil", Arquivos do Centro Cultural Calouste Gulbenkian, 2003, brings a number of questions regarding this point.

[7] This is being treated very shortly here. A systematic consideration of the transit of people and collections – inside and outside Brazil – and the effects and equivocations in these circulations has been done by Aristóteles Barcelos Neto, contemplating the Wauja case. See, for instance, « Des villages indigènes aux musées d'anthropologie », Gradhiva, 4 | 2006.; also Visiting the Wauja Indians: Masks and Other Living Objects from an Amazonian Collection. Lisbon: Museu Nacional de Etnologia, 2004.