

Anthropological contributions for sustainable futures

Research and interventions
in the fields of environmental needs, gender equity,
human rights and knowledge
in South America and the United Kingdom



JAVIER TAKS
SANTIAGO ALZUGARAY
Editors

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“Cuidado com as Palavras”: Prisoner’s Lessons for the Academic Activism

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Over more than the ten years, I have been dedicated to the research of crime and prisons. My research explored the functioning and modes of existence of the First Command of the Capital (pcc), commonly referred as “the biggest prison gang” or as “organized crime”. The pcc first emerged as a kind of prisoners’ union in the early 1990s, and today it is present in more than 90% of prison facilities and in most urban areas in the Brazilian state of Sao Paulo. The expansion of the pcc, that made it to be considered the most powerful criminal network in Latin America, happened after the addition of “Equality” to its “ideals” and occurred concomitantly with a stark decline of homicide rates in the State of São Paulo – perceived by the prisoners themselves and by the inhabitants of urban areas previously considered extremely violent, but also measured by official statistics.

In the beginning of my research, I avoided the dialogue with the majority of the bibliographies concerning crime and prisons. I saw a problem in this bibliography. It usually talks about the “problem of violence/crime/prison”, seeing its object as a problem in the very start point of the research. Generally, its concern is with “public security”. Underlying this approach is the State perspective assumed by the authors, who use to mobilize concepts like democracy, capitalism, economy and law, and denounce an “absence of the State”. Frequently, these concepts act like external forces that provide an explication to the phenomenon studied, but at the same time obscure the relations that constitute this phenomenon.

This is the approach adopted in most academic production about crime and prisons concerned with public policies and affirmative actions. In addition, this is commonly the discourse of the social movements. Thus, in order to confer primacy to what the criminals and prisoners do, talk, and think, I avoided the dialogue with the matters of public policies in that moment. If I avoid these dialogues, I engaged with others, particularly with productions from Political Anthropology, Philosophy, Anthropological Theory, Amerindian and Melanesian Studies. This text is divided in two parts. In the first one, I present the theoretical and methodological approach of my research, as well as the main results of the heterodox dialogues I done. In the second part, I show that this approach allowed me to learn with the prisoners and criminals something that I took carried to my academic work: to be careful with the words I use to say and write (or, as they say, “cuidado com as palavras”). I will argue that this academic posture has intense relation with the discussion about why and how our research can contribute to improve the lives of people (and other beings) in concrete manners.

My first research (Biondi, 2014), based on fieldwork in prisons, explored how the incorporation of “Equality” provoked a series of mechanisms and strategies to produce a

“Command” between “equals”, thus nourishing a tension between hierarchy and equality that infiltrates and spreads out across all the dimensions of the PCC. Inspired by a literature from Political Anthropology and Philosophy (Clastres 1977; Foucault 2002; Schwartz, Turner and Tuden 1966; for example), I took these practices as politics, but as a politics that concerns and relates to the everyday life of prisoners. Then I interrogate how, contrary to the police forces’ organicist perception of the pcc, it does not match the sum of its parts and, besides that, it takes place even in the absence of its members. One of these plans mentions the pcc as transcendence, something that only exists because of their immanent forces. In dialogue with current debates in anthropology, this approach allowed me to reflect about an immanentist anthropology on a transcendent construction, an anthropology that permits to think transcendence as it is produced by the actors themselves, without imagining it as a pre-existing entity. This pcc-as-transcendence, produced in the immanence and mixed to it, results on a decentred, non-hierarchical social formation. The pcc is thus presented as a creative social formation that challenges the concept of organized crime and offer another approach to the notion of prison gang.

In my doctoral research, based on fieldwork in the urban periphery of Sao Paulo, I argued that the pcc, having no stable interpersonal or territorial ties, could be thought of as a *Movement*. This approach had two important implications for the thesis. Firstly, it demanded a reflection on an ethnography in motion. Secondly, it required a description of the pcc-in-the-making. Thus, it concerned modes of doing – the pcc and the ethnography

My third research explored the relationship between the State policies and the prisoners’ activities. Whereas the policies or prison administrations do not start from a harmonically constituted State and do not act on the uniquely classified population—i.e. “State” and “prisoners” cannot be approached as monolithic units—my effort was to describe the micropolitics of incitements and variations in those relationships. It allowed me to show how state policies, legal dispositions, and official acts are part of the very configuration of the pcc. Examining the relations that form the pcc, I showed the mix and the conjugation—in contrast to the simple opposition—between, on the one side, the state and legal forms and, on the other, the criminal, informal and illegal ones. The state and legal forms are not only external forces that affect prisoners’ lives, but also elements that constitute their situation and their possibilities. They are inside and mixed with the prisoner life and, consequently, with the pcc. In turn, and through the same process, the prison life is productive of changes both in the management of prisons and in the public security.

Thinking in terms of movement is also to challenge the frontiers of the units of analysis. Then when I take the pcc as a Movement, I erase the lines that commonly make the prisons (but also the pcc) something clearly bounded (like a “total institution”, as called by Goffman (1961). As a result, it is not so easy to define what is ‘inside’ and what is ‘outside’ the pcc or the prison). This perspective avoids putting the pcc at the margins of state (as an analysis inspired by Das and Poole [2004] would do) or as something that arises in the “absence of the state”.

However, what do all these things say about affirmative actions or public policies?

As I tried to show, without approaching crime and prisons as problems and engaging myself with heterodox dialogues, whether theoretical or bibliographical, I can present research results that are significantly different of those produced by the researches focused on

public security. In this second part of the article, I will argue that these efforts offer other bases for the public debate about crime and prison. As is well-known, public actions concerning crime and imprisonment are largely influenced by the public debate and its relation to the yearnings of the population, linked to their sense of security.

The mainstream media in Brazil has a strong discourse about the need for stricter laws, exemplary punishments, and more imprisonment. Sectors of the political opposition (on the right and on the left wing) complain about the omission of government in the matter of public security. Most of the political class works for the reduction of minimum age for penal responsibilities or for the extension of the punishment for juvenile offenders. Most of the experts in the area, in turn, denounce the “absence of State” as the main factor to explain the problems arising from incarceration. Even the construction of more prisons is seen as a measure for guaranteeing human rights. Underlying all these positions is the claim for a greater State intervention, for more State, therefore. In an environment that is clearly not the place of social welfare, but of control and punishment, asking for more State is asking for more prison, more punishment, more control. This is the hegemonic discourse.

One of the things I learned with the prisoners was the “cuidado com a palavra”, an expression that can be translated as “be careful with the words you say”, with what you say. They seem to be aware of the performative character of the speech; they know that the words do things. The words act and can even kill. It is not new among anthropologists, especially those who dialogue with (ethnographical) theory of language. However, the lesson given by the prisoners is that I have to be careful with the words I use, with my speech, with what I say. Now, not only the native’s speech is an act. The words spoken or written by academics are also performative. Academic discourse is also an act of speech, therefore. Especially when involved in public debate.

It is difficult to think of any political or cultural change concerning crime and prisons matters when the anchor of the news program keeps saying, “The laws have to be more severe”, when most politicians respond to the public outcry and approve reducing the age of criminality, and when the specialists denounce the lack of State in prison. Perhaps the first step in a new approach to those who transgress the law is to stop seeing public insecurity as a lack of something and to address it because of the arrangements we have created. In this way, a politically engaged anthropology, and therefore that confer primacy to the native’s point of view; can offer a counter-discourse to the hegemonic discourse.

The debates about affect and activism that occurred in the Workshop made me think about the extension and delimitation of the affirmative actions. When do affirmative actions start? In fact, the contribution of anthropology in this field starts in their very practice, before the governmental sanctions. In these sense, anthropologists can work on affirmative actions in each step, through each word spoken. The anthropological practice, necessarily politic and engaged, can be an activist practice (and in fact, it is more and more). Different from militancy (because does not require an engagement in corporate groups or in shared ideas), an activist practice lead to an establishment of an ethic, a posture. Activism is about an ethic of daily life and thus it is possible to make the life an activist life. I think that what I am stating that an activist life has a strong connection with what Foucault (1994) wrote about the non-fascist life. This kind of attitude is also an affective action. In these terms, there are an intrinsic relation between affirmative action, activist action and affective action. All of them presuppose walking with (Ingold, 2011) and to amplify the voices listened in this walk.

I just learned the importance of the words for my natives because I walked with them. However, it was not enough. I amplified their voices and incorporated this care in my anthropological and political practices, in my activism actions and in my daily ethics. Now I am aware of the performative actions of the words I write and speak and, I argue, this is a way of offering a counter-discourse to the hegemonic one. By these tracks, I return to the political debate, but now accompanied by the prisoner's lessons and by the knowledge that ethnography allowed.

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