

# Review

MACAGNO, Lorenzo. 2014. *O Dilema Multicultural*, Curitiba: Editora UFPR/Rio de Janeiro: GRAPHIA. 303p.

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Multiculturalism has become, as we know, a thriving academic industry, particularly in North America. The key words “multiculturalism” and “anthropology” on the online bookstore amazon.com’s search engine displays over 1,000 books. With such a mass of works, why then read Lorenzo Macagno latest book, *O Dilema Multicultural*?

For two reasons. The first one is that Macagno has in the past made a point of not falling in the traps of anthropological commonplaces. In his recent article “Uma antropologia do político?”, his charge against the use of philosophical concepts in anthropology and most particularly against “recognition,” which he branded as shallow and falsely operative in anthropological situations, augured well for a potentially provocative work on multiculturalism. As we know, Charles Taylor and Kwame Anthony Appiah’s classic *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition* had linked multiculturalism to “recognition”, Macagno’s *bête noire*. Honneth, Habermas, Taylor and other philosophical *grands noms* have put both multiculturalism and recognition at the center of the modern condition and in doing so, Macagno argues, have become the vade-mecum of social scientists working on these subjects. However, as Macagno explains, the point of anthropology is to explain what people do and not what they should, a basic argument that today somehow gets lost in an acid bath of values, ethics and personal academic strategies. What irritates Macagno most, particularly in the fourth chapter of the book under review here, is philosophers’ use of anthropological categories and particularly of the discipline’s central one, culture, without these philosophers mastering the “most basic debates of [anthropology]”. Interestingly, these authors do not seem to have read non-Western philosophers on recognition either, which is, to put it mildly, quite ironic if

<sup>1</sup> In *Análise Social*, 210, XLIX, 2014, pp. 163-189.

not *un comble*, since we are talking about, well, multiculturalism, and even more so since they are talking about... recognition. (Or would it be, rather, that there is something fundamentally provincial about some multiculturalist thinkers?) The works of 10<sup>th</sup> century philosopher Abhinavagupta come to mind; most of the dimensions and dilemmas of recognition were already clearly delineated by this Indian philosopher from Kashmir.<sup>2</sup>

What then determines an academic book's success, asks Macagno, or more specifically what turns an average book "into a *Suma Teologica*"? The academic public's longing at a given historical moment. Macagno recalls interesting departmental anecdotes: how baffled some of his colleagues were to see their students in awe with Paul Gilroy's *Black Atlantic* but incapable of reading Edmund Leach's classic *The Kingdoms of Highland Burma* –as a result, the same colleagues asserted, young anthropologists prefer to "study hi-hop rather than the arduous maps of kinship". As Daniel Varisco, as well as Roberto Calasso, have suggested elsewhere, the success of Edward Said's work in spite of screaming methodological and epistemological flaws can only be understood by its coming out at the right time before a Western public eager to consume guilt and denunciations. For Jean-Marc Mandoloso, whose work on Foucault is less ironic than Sahlins' but definitely more damning, what matters above all else is the public's expectation and longing. When a scholar is astute enough to perceive this expectation and longs public recognition, he/she will produce such books. Interestingly, Macagno locates the popularity contest syndrome that (some) anthropologists are afflicted with in the multiculturalist academic industry. "Maybe, searching for a lost popularity, they carnivalized our most precious methods and theories to flee free of doubts the boring labor of butterfly collectors; on the other hand, they ventured to win another title, no less unworthy: that of storytellers" (p. 113). Thus, Macagno's book is also about integrity and his approach to scholarship undoubtedly jansenistic.

Macagno proposes also a reflection on the anthropological critique of multiculturalism, 20 years after Turner's classic article on the subject. Coining the concept *homo ethnicus*, Macagno detects a new essentialization of collective identities in an intellectual current, multiculturalism, that precisely pretends to the contrary, in a strange kind of paradoxical *homage du vice*

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2 *Hymne à la forme du Sans-forme Dakshinamurtistotra*, Paul Dubois, trad., 2014.

*culturaliste à la vertu constructioniste*. Macagno's notion of a "post-cultural" intellectual moment is also noteworthy.

For Anglophone readers, the main reason to read this book is this: Macagno delivers here possibly the first global anthropology of multiculturalism, comparing situations and intellectual histories (public policies are not the main focus) in a wide range of societies that include Canada, the United States, France, Brazil, Lusophone Africa, Mexico, Australia, West Africa, Latin America in general, Québec, Scandinavian countries, and India. (Maybe Macagno is more multicultural than he is aware of.) The reader will thus discover that several colonial administrators in Portugal's African colonies not only coined and used the word by mid-20<sup>th</sup> century but that they devised policies aimed at cultural cohabitation even under colonial rule. To my knowledge, the inclusion of multiculturalist intellectual currents within the Lusophone world have never before been included in vast historical comparisons with more predictable cases, such as the United States, Québec and Europe. In addition, Macagno's knowledge of South African anthropology and history is yet another of the book's assets –too often neglected or underestimated, South African anthropology, Macagno shows, has made considerable contributions to the discipline. This book is possibly the first global study of the intellectual history of multiculturalism.