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I suspect that, among other effects, the article will produce a feeling of anachronism among readers that have accompanied the recent developments in the ethnology of South American indigenous cultures. It seems to me that this failure, certainly attributable in part to the limitations of perspective that constitute one of the prices and risks of disciplinary specialization, does not fundamentally jeopardize the position defended by the authors towards the public debates concerning infanticide practice among indigenous peoples. On the contrary, I even think that the type of intervention they defend gains relevance by offering a counterpoint to the antinomies entailed by the contraposition of culturalist and universalist *partis pris* which had informed the discussion on the matter. However, given the limitations of space provided for this commentary, I choose to offer here only an ethnological critique of the interpretations given by the authors, from the point of view of the ethnographic data presented in the article – a critique which I hope will be received as an incentive for future reevaluations of their arguments.

When I refer to the feeling of “anachronism” that a possible reader may experience when reflecting on this article, I have in mind the postulate, openly recognized by the authors themselves, that an understanding of the cultural reasons for indigenous infanticide practices must be the point of departure for any debate focusing on indigenous infanticide. However, it seems to me that indigenous infanticide practices are not only

better understood than the authors allow us to think, but also – and this is my main point – that they are understood in a significantly different way than that underpinned by the perspective in which the article situates them. Quite explicitly in the typological grouping of motivations for infanticide with which the authors begin their argument (a quite generalist typological construction lacking explicitly cited ethnographic sources for its argumentation), but, in fact, throughout the entire article, there is a repeated reduction of the indigenous infanticide to a kind of birth control method and adaptation to adverse conditions for survival. The more general and evident implication of the reiteration of this type of procedure is the establishment of a functionalist image of indigenous societies, based on which exotic or horrific customs (according to the criteria of our own cultural sensitivity), like infanticide itself, are interpreted in terms of their practical usefulness for the given community.

The reader may perceive the ramifications of this image in various parts of the article. Taken together, they appear to manifest a view of indigenous infanticide practices as functionally performing a kind of “social selection” of the “fittest” members, with the social group actively assigning to misfortune and death those infants and children whose existence proves problematic for the community. It would be unfair to claim that the authors take this procedure to the extreme, performing an absolute reduction of the rationale for the practices of infanticide to a calculation of social utility, so to speak. Still, even when they appear willing to grant space in their argumentation to the terms in which the native thought systems themselves understand infanticide practices, the authors end up conceiving such practices as a mixture of “utilitarian calculation” and “cultural reason” – as exemplified by their explanation for the infanticide of albinos, which they base on the feelings of supernatural horror they raise and on the allegation of “difficulties for survival”. The repetition of this reductionist procedure throughout the article appears to be due less to a theoretical propensity of the authors towards utilitarian, functionalist, or adaptive explanations for infanticide practices, and more to an inability, in both the argument’s general economy and their specific interpretations of given ethnographic data, to draw out the cultural reasons per se that shape these practices (reasons that are irreducible to a mere calculation of adaptability to the environment or social utility).

In only one of the three types of infanticide distinguished, the authors explicitly recognize a situation which in their words “takes into consideration limitations of a physical, mental, and/or *religious nature*” (p. 854; my emphasis). However,

as mentioned, even in these cases, the infanticide is conceived as a mixture of utility or adaptability and “cultural reason” (“limitations of a religious nature”). I suggest that, taking the opposite path from that of the authors, one should extend and emphasize precisely those motivations for infanticide practices that were subsumed under the category of “limitations of a religious nature” – and that involve what appears to me to be better worded as ontological presuppositions on the nature of the world and ontogenetic propositions on the nature of persons – to the other kinds of infanticide classes, as well as (insofar as possible) to the interpretations offered for the particular situations presented by the ethnographic data that were cited. The authors themselves appear to be aware of this point's importance, judging by a generic commentary on indigenous conceptions associated with birth and the processes of bodily construction (conceptions which are in fact among the most important associations to consider in understanding infanticide practices). However, they definitely appear to have overemphasized the merely utilitarian aspect of infanticide, overlooking a deeper explanation of the association between indigenous infanticide practices, native theories of ontogenesis, and the negative values that many indigenous peoples ascribe to specific kinds of birth – especially those involving twins, newborns with apparent physical malformations, children of undetermined fathers, or those whose origin is attributed to adultery etc.

The reduction of infanticide practices to a functionalist or utilitarian logic could have been prevented by a more substantive incorporation of the recent theoretical developments in South American ethnographic studies. Some types of infanticide discussed in the article, like that affecting twin births, for example, and which the authors explain by the difficulties that they would imply for the mother in performing her daily tasks, received one already classic interpretation from the French anthropologist Lévi-Strauss. The dualism in perpetual disequilibrium that this author identified as one of the distinctive traits of the Amerindians bipartite ideology, and which can be summarized, broadly speaking, as the impossibility of indigenous thinking to establish a relationship of equality between two halves of a virtual duality that is actualized, is strictly associated with both the sinister and malefic value ascribed by many peoples to twin births, and the cases in which infanticide is determined by the preference for children of a specific sex¹. On another note, various ethnographic studies on the construction of kinship have revealed the ambivalent nature of the identity of the bodies of

infants and children, implied by the ascribing of a statute of otherness and animality to newborns². An examination of this association between newborns and animality, as well as the need it implies for a “hominization” of bodies through the construction of kinship, two motifs that are widely publicized and reported by contemporary ethnographic literature, opens another level of intelligibility for cases of infanticide in which the newborns or children that present apparent physical malformations are targeted, making these cases refractory to explanations in terms of utility, function, or adaptation (“survival difficulties”, “limitations of a physical nature”, “usefulness to society”, a “weight” for the family or group, etc.). This lack of a more in-depth consideration of the problems that contemporary South American ethnology recognizes as underlying or associated with infanticide practices jeopardizes not only the way the authors grasp indigenous infanticide, but also the overall image of society and the rationality projected on indigenous peoples.

In short, we are left with the impression that infanticide was grasped by the authors mainly by means of an analogical extension of *our* associations around the idea of abortion – that is, as a kind of rejection of an undesired child, yet perpetrated not exclusively by the mother but by the community as a whole. For me, it appears symptomatic of this perspective's ethnocentric bias that the authors seek to establish some relationship of continuity between indigenous infanticide practices and the modern practices of abortion and neonatal euthanasia practices which make explicit all the ambiguities of our own conception of the person. I hope that this critique will offer a stimulus for the authors to a more substantive incorporation of recent ethnological studies in their future meditations, allowing a more complex appreciation of indigenous infanticide to the extent that it is closer to the native point of view. For a more recent bibliographic review of some of the themes discussed in this commentary and their connections to indigenous infanticide practices, see Holanda³. The latter author does not limit her analysis to examining the position of these practices in indigenous thought systems, but also includes as the object of her investigation the legal and ontological controversies surrounding this matter.

1. Lévi-Strauss C. História de Lince. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras; 1993.
2. Vilaça A. Making kin out of others in Amazonia. *J R Anthropol Inst* 2002; 8:347-65.
3. Holanda MAF. Quem são os humanos dos direitos? Sobre a criminalização do infanticídio indígena [Dissertação de Mestrado]. Brasília: Programa de Pós-graduação em Antropologia Social, Universidade de Brasília; 2008.