

# Development and environmental conflicts in Brazil

Challenges for anthropology and anthropologists

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## Abstract

In the last three decades, since the democratization of the country and the rise of environmental concerns, Brazil has created a regulatory framework capable of dealing with the environmental impact of its core developmental policies. An environmental governance package has been constructed, with the environmental licensing process as its major instrument. However, this process is based on an urban planning perspective with little assessment of specific local ecological conditions and social organizations. Indeed, the process of globalization has resulted in an intensive exploitation of natural resources, which increases the use of marginal economic areas and the expansion of the economic frontiers into territories occupied by family agriculture, traditional peoples and ethnic minorities. Hence, we see the creation of conflict zones involving locals, state sectors and entrepreneurial groups. Increasingly, within this context, anthropologists have been required to act as experts and mediators by different groups, including state institutions, private companies, and social movements. Based on ethnographic research about the environmental licensing processes of hydroelectric dams in Brazil, this paper focuses on the limits of anthropological knowledge, the contexts of its production and the role of anthropologists in political processes involving unequal networks of power.

**Keywords:** conflict; anthropological knowledge; environmental licensing process.

## Resumo

Nas últimas três décadas, desde a democratização do país e a emergência das questões ambientais, o Estado brasileiro tem criado um marco regulatório para a gestão dos impactos ambientais em face da orientação de suas

políticas desenvolvimentistas. Um pacote de governança ambiental tem sido construído, tendo como seu principal instrumento o processo de licenciamento ambiental. No entanto, tal instrumento é baseado em modelos urbanos de sociedade e a perspectiva de seu planejamento guarda pouca abertura para contemplar as condições ecológicas específicas e a diversidade das organizações sociais locais. De fato, o processo de mundialização tem resultado na intensiva exploração dos recursos naturais, agravando o uso das áreas econômicas marginais à expansão das fronteiras econômicas sobre os territórios ocupados pela agricultura familiar, povos tradicionais e minorias étnicas. Com efeito, é possível observar zonas de conflito envolvendo grupos locais, setores do Estado e segmentos empresariais. Nesse contexto, antropólogos têm sido crescentemente chamados a atuar como peritos e mediadores por diferentes grupos, incluindo as instituições do Estado, companhias privadas, além dos próprios movimentos sociais. Baseado na pesquisa etnográfica sobre o licenciamento ambiental de hidrelétricas no Brasil, este artigo aborda os limites do conhecimento antropológico, os contextos de sua produção e o papel dos antropólogos em processos políticos envolvendo redes desiguais de poder.

**Palavras-chave:** conflito; conhecimento antropológico; licenciamento ambiental

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## Contemporary challenges for anthropology and anthropologists: new approaches, new fields of insertion

In the present context of economic globalization, marked by the expansive capacity for the colonization of territories and cognitive boundaries, the production of scientific knowledge is being increasingly incorporated into the dynamics of the market and its management mechanisms (Castelfranchi 2008). In this process, it is possible to observe the reconfiguration of universities as “knowledge corporations” (Bastin and & Morris 2003:79), and the diversification of forms of articulation of expert knowledge in decision-making processes and in various modes of governing. This process affects anthropology in that it increases the demand for new roles and positions to be filled by anthropologists; for example, as consultants, analysts, public agents and advisors.

While incorporating the contemporary tendency for insertion of expert knowledge in the public sphere marked by dynamics of governance and conflict management, the current diversity of forms of insertion of anthropologists calls for reflection regarding the uniqueness of these actions amid processes that not only expand the professional market of anthropology, but also multiply the ethical, theoretic and methodological challenges for those who question the conditions of production of ethnographic knowledge.

The expansion of anthropology in Brazil went along with the consolidation of the democratic regime, both in its recognition of the multiethnic character of Brazilian society and the legal rights of previously excluded ethnic groups (such as indigenous peoples and Quilombolas) and in the institution of Brazilian environmental policy. Indeed, anthropologists have

become ever-present figures in various sectors of government, such as those responsible for territorial and environmental management, protection of material and non-material heritage, and planning and execution of health, educational and land title regularization programs. Moreover, the expansion of anthropological engagement extends beyond academia and the spheres of public administration to non-governmental organizations, international cooperation agencies and consultancy firms. These new situations constitute “a professional reality” (Leite 2005) demanding reflection that goes beyond the debates relating them strictly to themes of ethics and fieldwork methodology.

It was in the context of these transformations and the consequent “pluralization of ethnographic traditions” that Oliveira (2009) put forward the following questions:

[...] is it possible that anthropologists are getting excessively involved in their research, interfering with the lives and institutions of locals where they should only observe and take note? Is there not a risk that we are moving away from the good, solid canons of the discipline, and relegating scientific research in favor of militancy, uncritical social-welfarism or even mere administrative intervention? (p. 3)

This article contributes to these discussions, reflecting on the potential benefits and challenges brought by new ethnographic practices and their respective enunciative positions. The aim is to put into question the structural conditions and underlying structural constraints of these fields that anthropologists are entering. The analysis will be based on our research on environmental licensing for hydroelectric dams, as it is illustrative of the processes mentioned above, namely, the increase in demand for anthropological expertise, the expansion of the professional market associated with consulting firms, and the renewal of militant anthropology (Ramos 2003) in the form of anthropologists serving as advisors to those they are researching in conflict zones. Emphasis will be placed on four separate figures in the dynamics of environmental licensing: the Department of Public Prosecution expert analyst, the public agent within environmental and other territorial agencies, the consultant hired to carry out environmental impact assessment, and the adviser of local movements and commissions by the affected communities.

## The emergence of Brazilian environmental policy: setting a new field of disputes

Faced with pressure at the national and international level, especially with regard to the protection of the Amazon forest and its people (Zhourì 2004)<sup>1</sup>, Brazil developed a new environmental policy during the 1980s and 1990s.<sup>2</sup> This policy mainly consisted of devices to assess environmental impact, and the introduction of licensing for potentially destructive projects.<sup>3</sup> The ‘participative’ orientation of the new policy not only foresaw the combination of expert and political assessment of the feasibility of new projects, but also provided space for the opinion of civil society, especially groups potentially affected by projects, to be voiced. Therefore, licensing was organized legally, and involved governance and progressive negotiation through evaluation of three successive licenses that would assure compliance with the technical and legal requirements of projects.

The contours and instruments of the new environmental policy incorporated the concept of ‘sustainable development’ which was presented as a more “convergent and optimistic” alternative proposal, (Viola & Leis 1995:77) capable of including the different ‘sectors’ of society in the search for solutions aimed at harmonization between economic development and environmental preservation. With a surprising catalyzing capacity, the growing prestige of the concept of sustainable development was accompanied by a process of depoliticization of debates and camouflaging of conflicts, making space for the paradigm of ‘ecological modernization’ and its operative logic of ‘adequacy’ in the scope of environmental licensing (Zhourì et al. 2005; Zhourì 2011).

However, the participative aims of accommodating interests and reaching consensual decisions became increasingly frustrated due to the multiplication of tensions among environmentalists, social movements, entrepreneurs, firms, technical bureaucracy, and others, where the meanings of ‘development’ and ‘sustainability’ remained contested. Meanwhile, Brazilian environmental policy was being consolidated, and new ways of involving

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1 See, for example, the impact of the construction of the Rodovia Perimetral Norte on the Yanomami people, and the Balbina hydroelectric dam on the Waimiri-Atroari people (RAMOS, 1999-2000; SANTOS & NACKE, 1988; SCHWADE, 1990). See, also, the campaigns against deforestation in the Amazon in the 1980s that culminated in the increased influence of Chico Mendes.

2 Law No. 6.938 that deals with the National Environmental Policy.

3 CONAMA Resolutions 01/86 and 06/87.

the country in the global economy were being tried, together with the corresponding economic adjustment and liberalization. Through this process, the achievements of re-democratization in the environmental field were captured and devoured by new conjunctural constraints that resulted in the hegemony of ecological modernization and pragmatic environmentalism (Zhouri, Laschefski & Pereira 2005; Zhouri 2004).

In this historical context, this paper looks at environmental licensing for hydroelectric dams in Brazil, beginning with a critical analysis of the management practices that have developed in the Brazilian environmental field since the 1990s<sup>4</sup>. The notion of 'environmental conflict' is central to this discussion for two reasons. First, the term suggests that the interaction between experts, entrepreneurs and those affected by projects is not presented as a process of negotiation through open communication and consensus-building; on the contrary, it implies a clash between social groups that express not only opposing interests, but conflicting projects, worldviews, and cultures. Second, it questions the definition of 'environment' institutionalized in licensing and in the energy sector, invalidating the idea that there can be undifferentiated representations of space and its resources (Acselrad 1997). After all, as demonstrated by Fuks (2001), it is the very legal formulation of the 'environmental question' that strives to build an apparent consensus founded on a definition of the environment as universal asset detached from particular practices, projects and meanings.

Environmental licensing reveals a continuing series of conflicts marked by a differential distribution of power in which social groups in dispute each have their visions, values and discourses shaped by the social place from where they are pronounced. As a *field*, in the Bourdieuan sense, (Bourdieu 1983; 1990a), environmental licensing structures relations among these agents, defining for them the place and the possibilities of action. The unequal distribution of economic, political and symbolic capital locates the agents within the field, providing distinct powers to enunciate and assert claims to their respective political projects.

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4 We use 'environmental field' as in Pierre Bourdieu (1983; 1990a), and Zhouri (1998).

## The modus operandi of environmental licensing

Although it is the standardizing instrument for the implementation of potentially damaging projects, environmental licensing depends on a broader matrix of administrative programs and projects managed by the State, particularly economic planning actions. The implementation of hydroelectric dams, for example, depends not only on licensing but also, and especially, on prior planning measures developed and implemented by the energy sector (Sigaud 1989; Vianna 1989)<sup>5</sup>. Among the most important measures are the formulation of plans to expand the generating capacity, the estimate of hydroelectric potential, and inventory and viability studies - phases in which technical and political options for specific projects are chosen.

The construction schedule and cost estimate of a project are determined before the licensing process begins. This is done without evaluation of the socio-environmental impact or assessment of the risks and costs of the project, and without meaningful consultation of those directly affected. As Vianna (1989) emphasized, environmental impact studies conducted in a posterior phase become subordinated to the logic which initially motivated the project, that is, national energy planning, according to a frame of reference of hypothetical functioning of the market based on economic and population growth projections, as well as predictions regarding price per megawatt.<sup>6</sup> (La Rovere 1990).

Thus, the fundamental features of this planning continue to be the ideal of 'development' and the concomitant inexorability of projects that interfere with the environment. The result is the limitation of the studies to the proposition of palliative measures to mitigate and compensate for damages caused by the project, constituting what we refer to as the "environmental adequacy paradigm" (Zhourri et al 2005).

This *modus operandi*, in turn, shapes the conditions and limits of the performance of anthropology in such processes. Anthropological knowledge tends to be inserted into this context via the following four positions: consultant hired to prepare environmental impact studies; expert within

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5 By 'energy sector' we refer to the confluence of: firms that produce and distribute energy in Brazil, sectors of the technical bureaucracy (including government) and environmental consultancy firms.

6 According to La Rovere (1990), planning studies for the energy sector base their projections on population growth of 1.7% annually and average economic growth rate of 5% annually for the period 1885-2010.

state agencies, such as IBAMA, FUNAI and IPHAN; analyst of the Federal Prosecuting Counsel, where that agency has received complaints or law suits; and, finally, advisor to social movements, commissions and entities organized by communities affected by the projects. In the following sections we will discuss the dilemmas, limits and opportunities which make up these enunciative places. We will do this in the context of constraints imposed by the operative logic of Brazilian environmental licensing, and in the broader context in which “neoliberal capitalism and the current techno-scientific mechanism superimpose – or impose – their mode of functioning on the norms and on the classical ethos of the study” (Castelfranchi 2008).

### *Anthropology in the field of environmental politics*

#### **Consulting**

CONAMA Resolution 01/1986 established the legal requirement that any company requesting licensing must itself hire consultants to conduct an Environmental Impact Evaluation of the project in question. This recognizes the need for studies to be conducted in the affected area in order to identify the likely effects of the project on the physical, biotic and socio-economic environment. It is in relation to the latter aspect that anthropologists work as consultants in the preparation of the environmental impact studies.

Nevertheless, as mentioned above, licensing a hydroelectric dam project is a complex process in which a variety of agents are involved. According to Mielnik and Neves (1988), three different production processes converge in building a dam: preparation of preliminary studies and projects, civil construction of the dam, and manufacturing of electrical equipment. These segments are integrated according to a logic of industrial articulation, by which the unit that generates energy becomes the final product of the entire productive process<sup>7</sup>. The particular characteristics of each segment involved

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7 The operation of the same economic group in various branches or stages in the construction of a hydroelectric dam illustrates the articulation of interests among the different segments that cooperate in the establishment of the dam; it also reveals the degree of concentration of power that occurs within the energy sector. An interesting example presented by Mielnik and Neves (1988) is the holding company Participações Morro Velho Ltda which controls the CNEC (National Consortium of Consulting Engineers S.A.), Construções e Comércio Camargo Córrea S.A., and Camargo Córrea Brown Boveri. While CNEC operates in the preparation of studies and projects, Construções e Comércio Camargo Córrea S.A. plays



in the production of a hydroelectric dam tend, therefore, to be conditioned by a single dynamic which transcends the specificities of each of its components (Mielnik & Neves 1987; Lacorte & Barbosa 1995). Thus, the very fact of producing a hydroelectric dam imposes a particular productive rationality and a specific division of tasks. In effect, although experts contracted by the builders and experts hired as consultants have different functions, both are immersed in a field of investments whose final objective is the production of units which generate hydroelectric energy. Therefore, as Mielnik and Neves point out, the interior of this field is marked by the organization of a production system supported by an extraordinary integration of interests:

[...] considering the hydroelectric dam as a product in itself, we find that the analysis of its dynamic and the evaluation of its effects indicate **a community of interests and the consolidation of a structure which tends to function in an articulate and coherent manner** (1988, p.24 – emphasis added).

Thus, independent of the views and wills of individual expert consultants, this integration of interests that functions within the productive process of hydroelectric dams has significant consequences for the actions of anthropologists hired as consultants. First, the role of consultant underlines a fundamental transformation in the conception and management of expert knowledge, as when knowledge is considered a commodity, its management and appropriation become guided by the economic rationality of capital.

In the case of the anthropologist hired as a consultant, it seems clear that his/her research objectives and thought process would become integrated with the operational horizons of the energy sector, so that his/her research would be conditioned by the schedule, budget, and primary aims which make up the operational logic of that sector.

It is according to this logic that the ‘environmental question’ appears as a strategic variable which would enable it to overcome the disagreement, impasses and resistance of the past (Pimentel & Lima 1991), on the basis of conflict identification and management, in order to guarantee both project approval and satisfaction of investors and financial agencies. From this perspective, if the success of energy sector policies depends on their capacity

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a key role in the civil construction sector, and Camargo Côrrea Brown Boveri S.A. is a manufacturer of heavy electrical equipment.

to manage environmental problems through mediation, negotiation and conflict management, it is worth questioning what these companies expect of anthropology.

In particular, experts and consultants are contracted to deal with the “socio-economic environment”, producing surveys and evaluations, and building consensus, under the guise of “legitimated solutions” (Pimentel & Lima 1991:51). Thus, if the environmental impact appears as a matter to be managed efficiently by the energy sector (Pimentel Filho 1988), the anthropologist’s role is to operate according to the ‘paradigm of adequacy’ or ‘paradigm of accommodation’. This means making proposals that do not call into question the model or social project inherent in the construction of the dam, even if its legitimacy is being questioned by subjects of the research. In terms of the compatibility between economic development and environmental preservation, this point of view supports institutional solutions to “administer” impacts, promoting the internalization of costs, the “transference of resistance” and the resolution of the “contradictions” which permeate the establishment of hydroelectric dam projects (Pimentel Filho 1988).

The contours of this logic constrain anthropological engagement, as consultants enter into each job with a set of expectations and consolidated conceptions about what their task will be. This kind of approach presents a multitude of theoretical and methodological problems for the practice of anthropological research. First, there is the question of fidelity to the academic precepts regarding ethnographic method. The tight budgets and deadlines that tend to accompany consulting make the anthropologist’s task difficult, and are generally not conducive to satisfactory ethnographic practice. The allocation of money and time to an anthropologist in these circumstances is subordinated to the overall project, which itself is dependent on market conditions.

Other questions arise about this situation. Can the anthropologist meet the employer’s expectations and still observe the ethical and methodological precepts of the discipline? As we have seen, if the anthropologist accepts the position and the expectations of the employer, his/her job becomes that of proposing appropriate mitigating and compensatory measures, building consensus and coming up with legitimating solutions. In doing so, wouldn’t the anthropologist be negotiating or managing the research subjects’ personal rights?

There is also the risk of expertise silencing those subjects. This occurred in 1998, in the licensing process for the Irapé dam, when consultants conducting a study of the local community decided not to support its recognition as a *quilombo*<sup>8</sup> – an ethnic recognition with accompanying rights which would have secured the territory for them. This shows how the authority of the expert discourse appropriated by the combined forces and interests at play can lead to the silencing of “social groups with their own voice, with a knowledge of themselves, possessing organizational forms and ample capacity of expression (Leite 2005).

These forms of proscription and silencing are insidious, not explicit; in the discourse of the consultant, *atingidos* (people affected by the dam project) do not speak on behalf of the place that they lay claim to<sup>9</sup>. Within the paradigm of adequacy or accommodation, dissent is eliminated by restricting the voice of the *atingidos* to the place in which they are expected to speak: the place of acceptance, of adjustment, of negotiation, of consensus. As Haraway (1999) points out, this is a type of ventriloquism in that “the effectiveness of such representation depends on distancing operations. The represented must be disengaged from surrounding and constituting discursive and non-discursive nexuses and relocated in the authorial domain of the representative” (p.138). The expert’s distant point of view - shaped by technical diagnoses and objective results - is produced as policy, resulting in the degradation of those who see themselves as passively represented by means of a tutelage that permanently authorizes the ventriloquist.

It should be noted, then, that the participative pretensions of licensing are being frustrated by its *modus operandi*, since the insistence on participative directives does not prevent the imposition of the policy of silencing the *atingidos*. In this dynamic, the role of consultants can be fundamental in the institution of controversies among experts, projecting them as spokespersons of living beings and subjects (Latour 2004) which the licensing recognizes by the terms *physical, biotic and socio-economic environment*.

The licensing of hydroelectric dams, and the conflicts it produces, reveal, therefore, what Latour (2004:130) calls the “partition of the forms of

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8 *Quilombos* have often been seen as hiding places of runaway slaves. More recently, they have been understood, in anthropological and legal terms, as territories traditionally occupied by descendants of former slaves.

9 The Portuguese is “os atingidos não falam a partir do lugar que eles reivindicam”

speech,” and the inevitable entanglements which result from the attempts at this partition. First, the licensing imposes large divisions between expert and political government levels, which have distinct jurisdictions and functions – expert teams produce their evaluations, studies and reports - hopefully in an impartial and objective manner - and political assemblies (councils, directories, commissions) produce their decisions autonomously, taking into account not only the facts (produced by the experts), but also the desires, projects and demands of the entirety of affected subjects.

However, alongside the institution of this separation between the expert and the political, communicating vessels are produced (Latour 2004): consultants are financed by the dam builders; data, though created, are brought to the fore as facts; and politicians are obliged to deal with conflicting reports, diagnoses and results which do not produce certainties, but rather multiply disputes. Consequently, if initially the technical and the political were separated and what was expected of the expert were packages of facts to subsidize decision-making, what the dynamic of the conflicts reveals is the continuous overlapping of these supposedly separate fields, where the expertise is performed as political.

### Experts in State Agencies

We will now turn to the relations between positions and discourses, and their effects of power (Bourdieu 1990) in the environmental field. The role of expert knowledge in the licensing process is particularly relevant to the challenges faced by anthropologists, as the production of truth about the feasibility of a certain enterprise puts different experts, institutions and fields of knowledge in dispute with one another. Professionals find themselves liable or accountable for their role in the production, consumption and distribution of discourses intended to be scientifically grounded and validated.

On the other hand, the processes that create conditions for the production of new academic research - transforming universities into “knowledge corporations”<sup>10</sup> - also alter the scope of expert action within state agencies.

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10 According to Bastin & Morris (2003: 79), “The knowledge corporation can be described as an organization of professional agents (now released from the regulatory control of disciplines) whose codes of ethics and new morality equips them with some of the protections and instruments to participate in the risky world of capitalist and entrepreneurial activity upon which the contemporary university must be re-founded. That is, universities are now less-secured financially by the state, and must realize themselves

The movement that spread the “‘enterprise’ form within the social body or social fabric” (2008: 241) puts to the public administration new criteria and principles of a “strategic rationale” in which state management must conform to an applied, rationalised and efficient economic model. Indeed, new reference points and safeguards are put in place for the activities of expert personnel within the State, where assessments, reports, diagnoses and projections are produced and managed according to new government rationality:

“it involves anchoring and justifying a permanent political criticism of political and governmental action. It involves scrutinizing every action of the public authorities in terms of the game of supply and demand, in terms of efficiency with regard to the particular elements of this game, and in terms of the cost of intervention by the public authorities in the field of the market. In short, it involves criticism of the governmentality actually exercised which is not just a political or legal criticism, it is a market criticism... (Foucault 2008: 246).

As Morris (2003: 141) argues, the conditions of production of anthropological knowledge vary significantly when one considers the institutional context. For Morris (2003:142), what is relevant in the case of consultancy is that the research conditions are *client driven* and this becomes increasingly so in legal and administrative spheres. Also, according to Daly (2003: 124), consultancy work in anthropology in Canada is conducted in the framework of native peoples’ territorial rights, but usually functions to remove legal obstacles to the extraction of primary resources from those lands. In Australia, as Morris (2003) showed, the activity of anthropologists in consultancy and within state agencies leads to new working conditions that affect the canonic research procedures of the discipline:

In the first place, the research time for land rights and native title work is often brief and/or truncated and ‘multi-sited’. The methodological expectation for long-term fieldwork and continuing association as a means of developing a culturally nuanced understanding is reduced to a process of conscientious observation, quantification, fact gathering, and recording direct testimony. Anthropology is reduced to a formal method rather an interpretative practice... (Morris 2003: 141).

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more evidently as independent capitalist managerial organizations”

In Brazil, as we have shown with regard to environmental licensing, these discourses can be related to consultancy - from advice given to local people to the activities of experts in environmental bodies and other associated state agencies (such as FUNAI). The experts in these agencies are faced with the same sort of problems and constraints as anthropologists. It is worth mentioning the budget and time limitations for the evaluation of the potential impact of a project on indigenous peoples, traditional communities, maroons, and their territories.

Small teams, low budgets, and the need to produce reports in compliance with the rhythm of the market are regular conditions for those working in state agencies. The deadlines for the production of reports by such agencies in the environmental licensing exemplify the pressures anthropologists are faced with. As environmental licensing has been seen as a possible barrier to projects or to development as a whole, the government has tried to strike a balance between the economic logic of investment flows, and evaluation of the impact projects might have. An example of this is Interministerial Act 419 of October 26/2011, which regulates the deadlines and the performance of public bodies involved in environmental licensing, such as FUNAI, Fundação Cultural Palmares and IPHAN.

With the task of producing reports about indigenous groups, maroon communities and goods of cultural interest, the work of anthropologists in these agencies is dictated by the adequacy logic of the licensing operations. Hence, it is understood that the focus of the licensing is not the feasibility study; rather, it is compliance with the legal requirements in such a way that the flow of capital produced by the projects is not prevented. Therefore, as an instrument of control disconnected from a plan for the use of land and resources, the licensing process dictates the production of the technical reports on which it depends. The concerns about deadlines reveal the focus on the economic feasibility of investments that guides the other expert and legal requirements for the realization of projects.

Interministerial Act 419 well illustrates the limitations imposed by short deadlines on the accomplishment of a range of complex tasks, such as: the manifestation of agencies for the definition of the Reference Terms for potentially damaging projects (15 days); conclusive reports related to impact assessment and the proposition of measures for mitigation and compensation (30 days). The adequacy logic becomes evident by the imposed rhythm,

and it accelerates considerably under the aegis of PAC (Program for the Acceleration of Growth). The focus shifts from the assurance of environmental quality protection and the rights of traditional peoples to the undertaking of an administrative process in accordance with economic interests. As such, environmental licensing is placed under the primacy of the economic and political agendas of other agents - government, corporations, investors.

It is in this context that Act 419 establishes in Chapter III, Article 6, clause 4, that: “the absence of statements of agencies and entities involved, within the established deadline, will not be detrimental to the environmental licensing process, nor to the issue of the license in question”. That is, the absence of a conclusive position from FUNAI or Fundação Cultural Palmares in processes that affect indigenous peoples and maroon communities must not be considered a condition capable of preventing the progress of the licensing process.

This essay highlights the need to develop a position that points to the existing nexus between the truth creation in this field and the social fabric at large, where very distinct discursive lines are drawn between expert knowledge, political projects and the expectations of the actors involved. In this context, we seek to emphasize the way in which anthropology is conditioned in these circumstances, underlining the importance of this conditioning in the production of certain discursive alignments capable of generating distinct political effects.

### **Expert analysis**

In Brazil, anthropology first functioned as an expert activity when the Constitution of 1988 was being drawn up, and a process of legislative review undertaken, particularly with regard to recognition of the ethnic pluralism of the society. Anthropologists prepared expert reports to inform legal and administrative processes about the demarcation of indigenous lands, thus acting as interpreters between local anthropological knowledge and the legal system. The 1990s were marked by an increase in demand for anthropological expert reports, as a result of legislative innovations related to environmental conservation and the evaluation of the socio-environmental impact of development projects (Leite 2005).

The increase in demand for expert reports made practitioners reflect on the challenges to the anthropologist as expert analyst. In particular, the

expectations of mediation and arbitration, which bestow on the researcher a responsibility to deliver well-founded judgements, providing certainties and stabilities in a field of conflict and controversy.

In contrast to traditional academic research, this new type of anthropological practice was intended to assist the decision-making of judges or public administrators with regard to litigation. This brought some difficulties, derived from the view of expert reports as examinations of facts through specific technical knowledge, composing different modalities of judicial proofs. Here, prior knowledge of, and interaction with, a group may qualify the anthropologist to write a report, but also make him the object of questioning and interdiction. The latter, as Gonçalves<sup>11</sup> shows, is something that results from the expectations of neutrality, distance, probity and objectivity of some in the legal field:

In relation to expert analysis, it can be said that the anthropological expert report is 'not legally unaffected'. In the heart of the Institution, the anthropological expert report has caused some perplexities, as the *parquet* is accustomed to act with judicial expert analysis which has its contours well-defined and where the expert examines concrete facts [...], examines a sick person; inspects a house, in case of negligent action, to determine the value of losses; evaluates a car; defines paternity (Gonçalves 1994: 85-86).

In this sense, challenges are presented by the combination of norms, expectations and resources which, though external to the field of anthropological research, conform and modulate the work of the anthropologist-expert, the latter undertaken in situations in which antagonisms are evident or latent. Such expectations refer, for example, to the idea that an anthropologist can make a decision, with a degree of technical-scientific exactitude, on a group's plea for ethnic recognition, or on the definitive delimitation of indigenous territory. The result is inflection of the position of translator to the role of ventriloquist, authorized by the dominion of the science called on to collaborate with the resolution of social conflicts. In these conflicts, the power over communities is also manifested as being able to bring into existence or to non-existence on the agenda of the State, certain groups, as such,

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11 Procurador da República, Ministério Público Federal, "Terras de Ocupação Tradicional: aspectos da perícia antropológica". In: O. SILVA, L. LUZ & C. HELM (org.) *A Perícia Antropológica em Processos Judiciais*.



as collective conveyors of specific rights.

In that case, the pitfall of an “objectivist arbitration” can lead the anthropologist to commit symbolic violence in which his scientific discourse sanctifies, in a heteronomous manner, and from the authoritative viewpoint of the judge, a certain “state of the divisions and from the vision of the divisions” (Bourdieu 2002: 119), in a context of disputes in which the “science of neutral verdicts” constitutes objects and instruments of the symbolic struggles by the (re)cognition of certain social subjects and their rights. It is in this sense that the expert analyst has a unique position in the market of symbolic goods since, as Bourdieu argues, the legal ordering of the territories and identities of which anthropological expert knowledge participates is a condition for the existence and political expression of these groups on the national scene, that is, “in the properly symbolic logic of the distinction [...] the real existence of the identity assumes the real possibility, legally and politically guaranteed, of officially affirming the difference (Bourdieu 2002: 129).

On the other hand, these symbolic and political struggles are ongoing; they do not end with the recognition of groups and the demarcation of territories, since in the political process of producing ‘the self’ and ‘the other’, the composition of uniting features and identities ends the idea of some identities dominating others. Thus, in place of a sincere expert acting as a ‘bold spectator’, the expert analyst is constantly implicated in the political disputes related to the command of the State over social groups and their territories. With respect to the ethnic fight or territorial conflicts, “the analysis of cultural specificity [...] goes beyond interpretative frontiers, into the field of political directives and legal regulation (Leite & Fernandes 2006: 7).

### **Advising and the new phases of a militant anthropology**

As we have illustrated, although licensing is founded on democratic and participatory principles, the process that sets it in motion can transform the participatory aspects into mechanisms of control. Certain projects and perspectives are totally excluded, not by a repressive or authoritarian politics, but by the invitation of subjects to a hearing whilst having them silenced.

The effective management of possible conflicts matters to the energy sector: it administers differences, promotes negotiation, sponsors public hearings, selects the expert personnel (and, therefore, the possibilities of risk

management), and provides investors and financiers with accounts. In the end, no technical controversy or disagreement appears problematic enough to delay the construction timetable.

Nevertheless, if it is in the control of the variables of these webs that power is exercised, strategies for creating new webs may appear, not only in the interferences produced by the confluence of techno-science and capital, but also in the *diffraction processes* (Haraway 1999) that produce counter-interferences from the meeting between social movements, academia and environmentalisms. It is in this encounter that the figure of the anthropologist-advisor appears, joining his/her expert local knowledge to militant practices to support the demands of his/her research subjects.

It is necessary to remember that the same context that drags science into the market, making techno-science accountable to financiers and investors, also provokes unforeseen social movements which demand responsiveness of scientific and other research studies. Here we see the ambiguity of current trends: the transformations in progress may produce both emancipation and subjection, liberation and control, given the connection between the forms of producing knowledge and producing the material world, of (self)-representation of alterity and the recognition of rights.

The experience of anthropologists as advisors and collaborators in the projects and demands of their research subjects is not restricted to the field of licensing for hydroelectric dams. Indeed, in Brazil, activity marked by advising and collaboration have always been present, shaping, as Ramos (1990) writes, a particular style of doing anthropology. However, as a locus where expressive combinations of science, expertise and politics are produced, where decision-making processes are constructed and social networks and institutional structures are in place, environmental licensing constitutes a unique area for reflection about contemporary settings in which anthropology finds itself, and the challenges it therefore faces.

In particular, it is clear that advisory anthropological texts are neither a rubber-stamp for demands and destinies, nor merely observational notes of a pure science without any relation to the world's production processes. To admit such distancing and separation – as one would from a positivist perspective – leads one to the same position as an absolute relativist who, upon confrontation, responds: “they’re just texts anyway, so let the boys have them back” (Haraway 1997: 55). Nevertheless, as we have pointed out, if on the one

hand, the incorporation of knowledge to a mercantile rationality transformed scientific research into something “too important to be left to the scientists” (Zimann apud Castelfranchi 2008: 14), on the other hand, subversions and re-appropriations are also conducted by other subjects, as Ramos points out:

It is as if, from the indigenous point of view, ethnography was too important to be left to the ethnographers. The research, symbolically saturated by repatriating cultural identity, which began as a political act of self-representation, is completed when the ethnographic product is duly appropriated (2007:16)

That is to say, production of anthropological knowledge in these fields is inevitably associated with the expectations and demands of research subjects, as well as with the possible effects and political consequences which derive from forms of appropriation of this knowledge. On this point, the position of the anthropologist-advisor is unique: rather than a distanced, arrogant observer, who roams among others as a type of *persona non grata*, the advisor’s presence is requested; he/she has his/her movements, ears and eyes constantly directed by the interlocutors to the words, images and people that they want to show.

As Magalhães and Hernandez highlighted (2010: 12), the recent experience of the “panel of experts” in the case of Belo Monte was a sort of “engaged participation” which maintains critical independence while at the same time allowing for the extension of knowledge produced in militant actions on behalf of social movements and organizations which support those threatened by the establishment of hydroelectric dams.

Our reflections on this position are based on experience of extension activities with communities affected by the Murta hydroelectric dam in the northeast of Minas Gerais State, Brazil. These activities began in response to a request by the local Commission of People Affected by Dams<sup>12</sup>. The objectives of the fieldwork were: to advise families threatened with forced displacement; to help local leaders understand and critically read studies of

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12 These activities are part of the project “Citizenship and Environmental Justice: Popular Participation in Environmental Licensing Processes”, implemented by the team of the Group of Studies in Environmental Themes of the Federal University of Minas Gerais (GESTA/UFMG) and coordinated by Professor Andréa Zhouri. This extension project is linked to the research project “Environmental Licensing in the Perspective of Social Sciences”, funded by the Research Foundation of Minas Gerais State (FAPEMIG) and the National Research and Scientific Council (CNPq).

environmental impact; and to diffuse information about the licensing process, emphasizing participatory aspects.

Fieldwork consisted of meetings with families and community leaders, followed by information gathering about the ways of life of these communities, with the objective of constructing data that would permit a critical review of the diagnoses presented by the company. In this manner, from the very beginning the construction of an ethnography of the dam-affected communities took on an evidently political character, given that the engagement in the field had the marked objective of advising.

The information and data produced circulated constantly within the spheres of the research and advising. The former informed the latter and conferred legitimacy derived from 'being there'; the latter benefited from the authority of the former. The data which was formed was rapidly transformed into technical and political capital used in the terms of the dispute by the signification and by the appropriation of the territory, as set out in the process of environmental licensing. In this context, the relation with local interlocutors was permeated by constant exchanges and by the diversity of expectations in relation to the role and results of the work. A significant example was the reaction of one resident upon meeting us for an interview, as registered in the notes of Oliveira (2008):

Mr. V. seemed quite at ease [...] He welcomed me and said my research was important because it was 'proof' that the people had been in the region for many years and that, after all this was 'noted', it would be 'proof' of everything that had happened, and that this could be used against the dam (Notes taken by Raquel Oliveira during fieldwork, in July, 2007).

Thus, local expectations seek to define the role and appropriate place for ethnographic records, namely, to function as 'proof' in favor of residents in the conflict they are experiencing. Thus, the resident attributes to ethnography the role of transforming oral content into written records, conferring upon it, by its connection to the disciplinary and academic field, the character of 'proof', since, as Ramos points out (2007: 17), from the point of view of demanding subjects, self-defense and self-representation go hand-in-hand.

In this scenario, it was not a plausible option to function as an omniscient 'observer', distant and inaccessible, and yet ubiquitous. The interlocutors were also partners in the ethnographic project, and expected

differentiated functions in this work. The notion of ‘proof’ is evidence of two things happening to ethnographic discourse; on the one hand, ethnography is invited to depart from the academic field in the strict sense, since it can fulfill a political role, giving prominence to the legitimacy of local rights in the context of the conflict. On the other hand, ethnography cannot give up the social place occupied by academic knowledge. Ethnography’s specificity and the origin of its authority derive from its connection to traditional methods of the discipline, as well as to institutionalized domains of academia. As Ramos notes:

Involvement in the public sphere of human and ethnic rights affects the anthropologist’s choice of research topics which, in turn, requires methodological means and theoretical moorings seldom found in the profession’s traditional tool kit. In other words, the anthropologist’s activism is not secluded from academic interests of the profession. Quite the opposite, one nourishes the other (2003:110).

In this sense, the political appropriations of anthropological discourse are noteworthy, becoming part of counter-reports which constitute important pieces in contexts of territorial disputes. Re-signified as counter-report to the diagnoses presented in the Environmental Impact Studies (EIAs), ethnography can function as a channel of expression and an instrument available in the ongoing political and symbolic struggle.

Nevertheless, the position of the advisor still produces its own challenges and ambiguities, since the advisor whose discourse and presence appears in the public arena in conflictive processes can easily find herself in a position that subverts the potentialities of her action. In meetings, public hearings and other moments of public debate, the position of advisor as experts places her in situations in which she is called on to answer not only *about* the group, but *for* the group, projecting herself, inadvertently, as spokesperson. Thus, ironically, the problem of ventriloquism appears once again in an antipodal position to the expert consultant of the dam projects.

It is possible to reflect that in conjunctures of conflict, ethnography is faced with demands made by its own interlocutors in their efforts to subvert the production of knowledge which is distant and prejudicial. The acts of *hearing* and *writing*, inherent to ethnographic production, appear, then, not only as procedures to construct sources, production and registry of data, but

also as involvement in the demands of the group. The position of *spectator-ethnographer* is especially questioned in those cases in which hearing represents not the invasion and instrumentalization of the other, but rather somebody else's demand, making it an exercise in complicity and acquisition of its testimonial aspect (Le Ven et al. 1997; Scheper-Hughes 1995). That disposition to hear implies the possibility of re-creating the subjects involved, because the interviewees appropriate the texts, the ethnographies produced as political instruments of exposure, which publicize the subjects' own versions and interpretations of the past and present.

The anthropologist appears, then, as a political actor precisely because she is an "expert witness" (RAMOS, 1999-2000) and the ethnography is presented as a modality that can transmit her testimony in a particular manner. It does not stimulate talking or even hearing, but rather produces a set of discourses delivered and disputed, noises and interferences which constitute, in the course of the conflicts, diffraction processes. The metaphor chosen by Haraway (1999) is relevant because, contrary to reflection, diffraction is related to the interference of the resulting waves, in processes in which there is interaction of a wave with an obstacle, or when the latter finds a gap through which it can pass through an obstacle. In this case, the wave circumvents and crosses an obstacle, resulting in diverse waves, originating from the initial one, which end up recombining upon passing through a given unit of space (Roditi 2005:64).

This metaphor from physics expresses well the dynamic that operates in the combined action of anthropologists, affected populations, environmentalists and social movements. If reflection represents policies of heteronomous representation - that is, as ventriloquism - then, in processes of diffraction, the autonomy of discourses and enunciative places is maintained whilst the occurrences of superposition and interference, in the face of determined obstacles and adversaries, are valued. In this process, the effects are more important than the concerns with origin and purity: "the diffraction is a cartography of the interference, not of the replica, or of the reflex, or of the reproduction. A diffractory model does not indicate where the differences appear, but rather where the effects of the difference appear" (Haraway 1999: 126).

Thus, in contrast to the position of the spokesperson, the advisor plays a supporting role, bolstering the protagonism of the local subjects. As Ramos says (2007), the advisor has a temporary position in a course which goes from

engagement to detachment: “now our anthropological contribution has been reduced to what I deem to be its appropriate dimension; that is, as supporting cast in a script that is of their own creation” (2003:113).

### **Final remarks: situated knowledge and the effects of place**

The question posed in the beginning of this article appears to assume that there is a considerable gap between ‘operational truths’ and the ‘normative discourse’ about the exercise of anthropology as a discipline, assuming the externality of the anthropological view in its research practices. Nonetheless, this article has sought to examine the anthropological praxis in contemporary conjunctures and experiences in which the external position of the observer is constantly questioned.

This article thus indicates an epistemological and methodological perspective from which customary representational practices of anthropology are constantly being challenged. Since the postmodern critique, there are analyses which problematize the visual formats of such practices based on the association between vision, writing and power (Clifford 1989). Nevertheless, the post-colonial scenarios that inspired such critique not only made possible the appreciation of ethnography as writing, but also produced profound methodological transformation (Gupta and Ferguson 1997), resulting in new forms of production and application of anthropological knowledge.

This essay argues that new forms of ethnographic engagement which link research, advising and consulting displace the terms of the traditional method of participant observation. The participation to which we refer is composed of a “circumstantiated description of events and people” (Oliveira 2009:5) and beyond, that is, a situated view in which anthropological discourse is always influenced by specific *production conditions* associated with the *effects of relations of place*. According to this framework, our analysis refers both to the more immediate context of enunciation, namely, the ethnographic situation, and to the social space which structures inter-discursive relations. It is in this sense that the Bourdieuan concept of *field* becomes relevant, since it allows us to emphasize that positions in social space configure *enunciative places* from which certain constraints and potentialities become enrolled in discourses.

It is a matter of taking into consideration the effects that result from the

fact that expert opinions, studies and reports, as modalities of anthropological discourse, are texts/scripts produced and appropriated through correlations of forces. If we view this set of relations reflexively, we can conduct preliminary attempts to make ourselves responsive to what we learn to see from the perspective of the place in which we situate ourselves, socially and cognitively, in the experiences and interactions which we develop with our research subjects.

We argue, then, that the participation of the anthropologist in these engagements promotes abandonment of self-representations of distancing inscribed in a “representation policy” which employs spokespersons and representatives at the same time as it de-authorizes the represented (Latroux 2004). The ventriloquist can only be himself/herself as a fearless and “epistemologically detached” observer (Haraway 1999: 138), the type who produces a kind of “conquering gaze from nowhere. This is the gaze that mystically inscribes all the marked bodies, that makes the unmarked category claim the power to see and not be seen, to represent while escaping representation” (Haraway 1997: 57).

As we have underlined, it is possible that insertion of the ethnographic practice into contexts of conflict creates serious difficulties for the role of ‘fearless spectator’, in participant observation. The difficulties and challenges refer, then, to the aim of producing “not so much effects of distancing, as of connection, of embodying, and of responsibility” (Haraway 1999:122).

Conclusively, the transformations we have analyzed lead to two central points which are interconnected and should be the subject of later discussions: on the one hand, the regulation of produced anthropological knowledge (code of positions and ethics, committees, measures relating to the professionalization of the craft) and, on the other hand, the capacity of anthropological knowledge to produce interferences, resonances and other effects with regard to current social and political processes.

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