



Teaching the Anthropology of Childhood in Brazil (translated by Catherine V. Howard)

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Introduction

In recent decades, the anthropology of childhood has been taking shape as a discipline in Brazil, opening up new arenas for training researchers in this field. Twenty years ago, each researcher had to find their own way among various possibilities for studies of children, on children, and with children through an anthropological lens. Today, arenas for training are taking shape through specialized courses and, to a greater extent, conferences and events, which have become major spaces for disseminating research and debating topics in the field. In this paper, I highlight some of these arenas and debates, pointing out certain trends and configurations that typify this field of anthropology in Brazil and how it is taught. This paper does not claim to be an exhaustive survey of the field in Brazil, either in research or in teaching, but rather, a reflection based on some initiatives that I believe are innovative and illustrative, and which appear to be converging on certain points.

Currently, the anthropology of childhood in Brazil has been a valuable aspect of the training of not just anthropologists, but also other professionals, especially educators and teacher trainers. In fact, anthropology has been attracting the attention of people working in a wide range of fields and, in this case in particular, those who work with Brazilian children. This is part of a growing interest in anthropology as a discipline and in ethnography as a research method. Anthropologists have been debating the relevance and even the possibility of conducting ethnographic studies outside of anthropology, with some expressing doubts about the dialogues proposed by people in other disciplines. Nonetheless, professionals in various fields have been addressing these issues and undertaking studies that are increasingly sensitive to children's perspectives. This trend has been reinforced by the expansion of courses in the anthropology of childhood. Indeed, including materials about engaged anthropological projects in the training of new researchers has revealed an activist, critical facet of this field of anthropology. Its dislocation of hegemonic notions of childhood and children's lives are leading to a revision of public policies and various approaches to the formal recognition, protection, and guarantees of children's rights.

Teaching the anthropology of childhood

Although the anthropology of childhood and children has flourished over the last twenty years in Brazil, it has not been accompanied by a more systematic approach to teaching the topic in courses at either the undergraduate or graduate level. In Brazil, higher education is divided between public and private universities, as well as some institutions with mixed structures. They may offer courses in social sciences or anthropology to undergraduates, and master's and doctoral programs in anthropology or social anthropology. Courses in the social sciences (which include anthropology, sociology, and political science), first offered in the 1930s, are among the oldest fields in the relatively recent history of higher education in Brazil, which began in the nineteenth century with the professions of law, medicine, and engineering. Efforts have been underway in the past few years to set up undergraduate majors in anthropology, still too new to have awarded their first degrees.

Even more recently, another movement has begun in the country, aimed at providing higher education to indigenous peoples. This may involve including indigenous students in regular courses offered by universities through affirmative action programs, in which case indigenous students learn side by side with nonindigenous ones in disciplines such as anthropology and social sciences. Such programs have been in place at the Federal University of São Carlos (UFSCar) since 2008,

expanding on other campuses under the so-called Quota Law, federal legislation that promotes the enrollment of indigenous students in public universities. Another way in which indigenous students are benefiting from higher education is through specific courses offered by universities, such as the Intercultural Teaching Certificates for indigenous students trained as teachers for indigenous schools. This is illustrated by the Federal University of Santa Catarina (UFSC), which graduated its first class of such students in 2015. Yet another way is through special initiatives, such as the course in ethno-development offered by the Federal University of Pará in Altamira, which brings together students from indigenous peoples, traditional Afro-Brazilian communities, river dwellers and fishing populations, family farmers, and members of the black liberation movement in this part of the Amazon region. Through these trends, indigenous professionals in training are discussing indigenous concepts of childhood, through which educational initiatives in the anthropology of childhood, using various pedagogical methods, have been implemented throughout the country, with notable results.

Beyond university courses, indigenous peoples are being professionally trained to become lawyers, child services counselors, indigenous teachers and teacher trainers, and health care workers. This has been strengthened by discussions underway in the anthropology of childhood, which encourages reflections on the hegemonic notions of childhood that inform current public policies in Brazil. In a country that has only recently taken steps to overcome various social vulnerabilities, with a history of extreme poverty and great ethnic diversity, these discussions have become crucial.

Course on the anthropology of childhood

Let me now comment on a graduate course I have been teaching at the Federal University of São Carlos, which illustrates some of the opportunities for training in the anthropology of childhood. The objective of this course, the first offered to a new entering class, is to present the major questions and topics under discussion in this field, as well as the main concepts and methodology used in these studies. A significant part of the course involves the analysis of texts resulting from anthropological research projects that focus on children and their lives, as both objects of research and subjects of interviews.

The course begins with an incursion into two topics that are always emphasized in these studies, those of enculturation and socialization. We discuss how various contemporary studies on the topic of childhood deal with these processes, which has the effect of homogenizing their approach and leading to a single correct answer: everything that involves social action has the effect of enculturating or socializing individuals, turning them into social and cultural beings. A few mechanisms are mentioned when there is some sort of resistance to this process. In the course, we engage in a critical reading of these concepts. Reading classic texts in the field (Victor Barnouw (1967) and Margaret Mead (1955, 1963) for the concept of enculturation, and the collection organized by Phillip Mayer (1973) on the concept of socialization) allows us to see the value of their proposals and analytical approaches. The value of such studies must not be underestimated, but reading them along with a critique allows us to question what people are actually doing or think they are doing and seek to do through the processes we understand as “socialization.” (Cohn 2005).

Using Christina Toren’s study (Toren 1990), we turn to the question of how children play an active part in the socialization process, which is a relationship, not a one-way street between clearly marked agents and recipients, or one leading from an absence of socialization to the fully

socialized. The course shows students that reading about how children are engaged in this process can open up avenues for new research questions. How children play active roles in the production of meaning in their lives illustrates how any group plays a vital role in producing meaning, including anthropologists when they analyze such processes. Speaking with children and viewing these processes through their eyes complete the data gathered through research, frequently revealing aspects that would be hidden from other points of view. More specifically, the course explores the methodological proposal of ontogenesis, that is, the way in which persons become who they are, along with their micro-histories, as possible avenues for research.

We then move to a fundamental discussion for every undertaking of this nature, as I understand it, which is the discussion of the various ways of being, becoming, and creating children in the world. As Margaret Mead (1955:41) said, everywhere there are children but they are not equally children everywhere – and this is what anthropologists are interested in studying. Next, we review Ariès’s historical analysis, a seminal study demonstrating how the notion of childhood we have inherited in the modern era is not a fact in and of itself, but a historical and local construction. His explanation, based on the changes occurring in the *ancien régime* of France, opens the doors for students in the course to grasp the historical background that led to the creation of our “sense of childhood” and to understand the context within which this notion of childhood was configured, within a particular family system and through an experience that increasingly segregated children (through schools) from adults. This fine work is inspirational for thinking not only in terms of historical changes, but also in comparative terms, enabling an analysis of the diverse *notions of childhood* that exist in the world. To illustrate this parallel, we discuss indigenous notions of childhood, more specifically those of the Xikrin of the Bacajá region in Brazil, where I conducted my research, and those of the Chewong of Siberia (Cohn 2000, Howell 1988).

A course such as this one cannot ignore debates over research methodologies. This is always a fundamental issue, even at this time when many criticisms are aimed at the anthropological project, ethnographic authority, and so on. Except in certain arenas, where other fields have addressed gender issues or childhood, anthropology continues to be an enterprise with an adultcentric, male bias. In this case, being adultcentric has two effects that we seek to avoid in this course: being incapable of speaking with children in ways that would allow us to apprehend their point of view and their experiences *per se*; and considering children relative to the final product they will become, adults as defined in that setting. Being able to see how children think and make sense of the world that surrounds them also allows us to see how they are producing their own futures, without foreseeing a single end point to this process.

We also engage in a crucial debate in this field: what are the modifications that must be made in ethnographic fieldwork to enable anthropologists to study children? Anthropologists have long been exhorted to practice “participant observation,” through which the researcher participates in the lives of those studied, thereby coming to understand the subtleties of another way of life. However, this can sometimes be difficult when an anthropologist, being an adult, is going to conduct research in which children are the focus of attention. It is necessary to create spaces, languages, and relationships of trust with children and the adults responsible for them. We therefore read texts that raise the question of the relationships that are possible in research on the points of view and experiences of the child, given that the anthropologist is an adult (Pires 2007). We read about ways of accompanying children in their daily life as well as ways of using other languages, for example, that of drawings (Cohn 2005). Finally, we look at various ways of conducting research along with the children (James & Christensen eds. 2000).

The third part of the course is devoted to the topic of indigenous children. We spend more time in the course on this topic, partly due to it being my own research specialty, partly due to its having been studied for a longer time in anthropology than in other disciplines in Brazil. In doing so, we return to some conceptual questions, bearing in mind that the first anthropological studies of indigenous children in Brazil were influenced by functionalism and culturalism (Fernandes 1976; Schaden 1945, 1962 and 1976). These studies, which offer valuable ethnographic data and inspiring analyses, nonetheless view the particularities of these children as developing within small-scale societies with determinant social roles, norms of conduct, and social positions. We highlight the intrinsic value of these works, avoiding an anachronous judgment that rejects them outright, and instead understand that they were products of their time and must be considered in such terms. We can still see once again the limitations that result from the notion of development toward a final goal, a pre-ordained end product toward which children develop.

We then move to analyses that seek more directly to account for notions of childhood among various indigenous peoples in Brazil, using several ethnographic cases that have been brought together in a book that introduced this topic in Brazil (Lopes da Silva & Nunes ed. 2001). We also read a monograph by Antonella Tassinari (2007), which undertakes a comparative study, demonstrating that the ways of being, becoming, and raising children vary among indigenous peoples and differ especially from those ways that are familiar to researchers. This is fundamental for us, since those who formulate public policies, rarely being indigenous, have a Western outlook on what they observe, often without being capable of seeing the realities in which they work.

One of the state policies directed at indigenous peoples concerns formal schooling (Santana 2005; Codonho 2007; Alvarez 2004). Throughout Brazil, schools have been built for most indigenous children. These schools are the result of bringing to fruition specific rights that the 1988 Constitution guaranteed to indigenous peoples. The daily routines in their schools must accommodate each group's language, social and political organization, autonomous self-determination, forms of knowledge, culture, and modes of teaching and learning. These rights are highly valued by indigenous peoples, who hope to equip themselves through schooling to navigate in the broader society, where speaking the national language, doing business, drawing up and signing documents, etc. are fundamental skills. Their schools are set up in ways analogous to many other types of new schools, in which different notions of childhood, modes of teaching and learning, etc. coexist in a state of relative conflict with each other. This leads to a debate raised in the course: how do these schools inflect and respect indigenous notions of childhood, forms of knowledge, and lessons?

We then move into a discussion on children's religiosity with an interesting text that shows the different relationship that adults and children have with the "wicked ghost," an entity linked to popular Catholicism in a small city in northeastern Brazil. The study (Pires 2007) demonstrates that not only do children and adults attribute different meanings to the entity, but there is actually an inversion of meanings between the two.

Next comes a look at a very serious debate in Brazil, that dealing with street children. The issue of children who live in the street has long been a problem in the country. These children have always been stigmatized, marked out by everything they lack: family, a house, schooling, morals, and suitable activities. They have long been referred to in legislation as "minors," a term that, in Brazil, refers not just to their age but also to their legal and juridical contrast with other children who have families, houses, and so on, and who are thus less vulnerable. The texts we read are exercises in listening to these children and accompanying how they construct relationships among themselves

and with urban spaces, institutions specializing in “needy minors,” and their natal families and the families they construct (Calaf 2008; Gregori 2000). We also explore notions of motherhood and paternity used in the street and between these different spaces. These texts, as ethnographies, trace the numerous paths that these children create among various spaces, revealing their skills and capacities to behave appropriately within each, and their attempts to maintain something they do not consider to be a lack, but something positive: their autonomy.

Children in vulnerable situations are also the topic of research in another seminal work that explores the “circulation of children” among different houses and formative spaces (Fonseca 1995, 2006). This ethnography goes beyond the commonly accepted understandings and the hegemonic model by demonstrating how children can be raised in various familial spaces without cutting their bonds of filiation. The work has been seminal in reconsidering the regulations associated with adoption law in Brazil, which in practice removes these children from such circuits and turns them into “orphans” within a system that allows strangers who are better equipped to get through all the bureaucratic hurdles to adopt them. The creation of this new relationship comes at the expense of cutting off a series of others, which are resources historically used by Brazilian families but which are not recognized in legislation or by hegemonic norms. How such children themselves deal with these institutionalized spaces and the state’s evaluation of their families is the subject of another text we discuss in this course (Ribeiro 2007).

The final work we discuss is an ethnography that examines how reciprocity is configured in situations involving voluntary work, in a case study of people volunteering in a hospital for children with cancer (Fioravanti 2006). This intriguing study reinforces the theme of the course that what is always at play in each case is a particular notion of childhood. Here, it is the idea of a childhood lost to the disease and the disabilities it entails, of children who cannot play, of a disease that has robbed them of even their ability to be happy, that is, their very childhood. What the volunteers attempt to produce in these children is this happiness, so that, even if for only a fleeting moment, they can enjoy their childhood once more. Thus, as many volunteers say, the greatest reward they receive is the smiles on the faces of these children.

Overall, the course allows us to consider a way of teaching the anthropology of childhood while also reflecting on some of the broader concerns and debates being discussed in Brazil. As a country that is multifaceted and diverse, still plagued by wide class divisions (although these have fortunately lessened in recent decades), the themes of the variety in forms of childhood, the diversity in types of families, the numerous resources used by families that are usually overlooked by the state, the public policies dealing with children, and the challenges of schooling are all topics that are not merely of academic interest, but also ones inviting activism and intervention. Anthropologists have been active in the formulation, establishment, evaluation, and monitoring of public policies for children in Brazil, dealing directly with the state, multilateral institutions, nongovernment organizations, and university projects that evaluate such policies. These have become crucial arenas for anthropological activism and therefore should be included in the courses we teach on the anthropology of childhood.

As with every course, this one is not exhaustive. It can be supplemented with any of a number of further analyses: the sexual violence suffered by children; international adoption, which can pose greater problems than it solves by ignoring children’s prior bonds; consumption patterns among children and the food traditions they inherit; and children who are not at risk or vulnerable, researching their lives outside of school and other institutions. The course serves to expose

students to positions, approaches, methodologies, and analytical findings about and with children in Brazil, and to stress their political implications, encouraging better approaches to analyzing and evaluating public policies that tend to be homogenizing and to have an adultcentric viewpoint, hardly capable of understanding how children construct their worlds.

Other educational arenas: conferences, research groups, and events

Besides formal education in anthropology, other arenas for training in this field have been influential in Brazil. As noted earlier, anthropology courses are not the only ones where the anthropology of childhood is taught. Training programs for indigenous teachers, as well as undergraduate and graduate courses in education, have contributed to the debates and the construction of knowledge in anthropology dealing with children. For example, the Intercultural Teaching Certificate program at the Federal University of Santa Catarina includes the anthropology of childhood in its curriculum.

Probably the strongest educational arena in Brazil lies in the events and research groups devoted to the topic. Throughout the country, professionals and academics have been organizing work groups and symposia at conferences and holding seminars to discuss the subject.

At national conferences, for example, researchers in the specialty have coordinated work groups at the annual meetings of the National Association of Graduate Studies in the Social Sciences (ANPOCS) and during the biannual meetings, known as the Brazilian Anthropology Meeting (RBA) held by the Brazilian Anthropological Association (ABA), as well as local meetings organized by ABA, in particular the Equatorial Anthropology Meeting (REA). These are the main conferences in the field of anthropology that take place in Brazil, bringing together national and international researchers. Such meetings have included sessions for discussing the anthropology of childhood on a continuing basis. Regional and multinational conferences, such as the Mercosul Anthropology Meeting (which brings together researchers from the Mercosul countries and is held every two years in one of the member countries), have provided further occasions for discussing the topic. Sessions on the subject have also been organized for the multinational meetings of the Luso-Afro-Brazilian Conference, including the one held in Brazil.

The list above deals with the inclusion of the topic in conferences that Brazilian associations have helped to organize, but it is worth adding that, along with international colleagues, Brazilian researchers have proposed and coordinated sessions on the anthropology of childhood in foreign conferences such as those organized by the Portuguese Anthropology Association and the meetings that were held by International Congress of Americanists in Mexico and Vienna.

Besides these large conferences with symposia, panels, and work groups on the topic, events have been organized that deal specifically with the anthropology of childhood, such as the first two meetings of the Seminar on Indigenous Children and Childhoods (the first held in Campo Grande, Mato Grosso do Sul, in 2011, the second in São Carlos, São Paulo, in 2014, with a third planned for Santa Catarina), and the Research Colloquia on Childhood and the Family held in Porto Alegre, Rio Grande do Sul, which have met three times so far. Similarly, research groups are being organized in various universities, promoting opportunities for discussion and education and lending support to organizing events.

In summary, courses on the anthropology of childhood have been expanding and entering new

arenas in Brazil, enabling the field to consolidate and gain academic recognition. Furthermore, the anthropology of childhood and related studies on and with children have gained ground in courses in training, evaluating, and intervening in public policies on children, through programs in which researchers and universities research centers are engaged. This is a vital facet of the field, one that has the potential of engendering improvements in policies dealing with children in Brazil.