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Education, Political Ontology, and Indigenous Issues in Schools

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Abstract

This article articulates political ontology – notably the proposition of multinaturalism, stemming from the ontological turn in Anthropology – with the field of education, in order to rethink the place of Indigenous peoples in schools. We begin from the understanding of schools as spaces of coexistence and tension between distinct worlds and ways of life. Based on this foundation, we analyze three sensitive points in approaches to Indigenous issues in the school context: the notion of authenticity, the relationship with the nation-state, and belonging to the land. The analysis demonstrates that Indigenous territorial struggles, in their cosmopolitical dimension, together with the framework of multinaturalism, offer powerful tools for the construction of anti-colonial educational practices. Such practices not only challenge the human exceptionalism of Western ontologies, but also expand the political-pedagogical imaginary, positioning themselves as essential contributions to confronting ecological collapse.

Keywords: Indigenous issues. Schools. Ontological turn. Multinaturalism. Ecological collapse.

Educação, ontologia política e questões indígenas nas escolas

Resumo

Este artigo articula a ontologia política – notadamente a proposição do *multinaturalismo*, proveniente da virada ontológica na Antropologia – ao campo da educação, a fim de repensar o lugar dos povos indígenas nas escolas. Partimos da compreensão das escolas como espaços de coexistência e tensão entre mundos e modos de vida distintos. A partir dessa fundamentação, analisamos três pontos sensíveis nas abordagens da temática indígena no contexto

escolar: a noção de autenticidade, a relação com o Estado-nação e o pertencimento à terra. A análise demonstra que as lutas territoriais indígenas, em sua dimensão cosmopolítica, e o marco do multinaturalismo oferecem ferramentas potentes para a construção de práticas educativas anticoloniais. Tais práticas não apenas desafiam o excepcionalismo humano das ontologias ocidentais, mas também ampliam o imaginário político-pedagógico, configurando-se como contribuições essenciais para o enfrentamento do colapso ecológico.

Palavras-chave: Questões indígenas. Escolas. Virada ontológica. Multinaturalismo. Colapso ecológico.

Educación, **ontología política y cuestiones indígenas en las escuelas**

Resumen

Este artículo articula la ontología política – en particular la proposición del multinaturalismo, proveniente del giro ontológico en la Antropología – con el campo de la educación, con el fin de repensar el lugar de los pueblos indígenas en las escuelas. Partimos de la comprensión de las escuelas como espacios de coexistencia y tensión entre mundos y modos de vida distintos. A partir de esta fundamentación, analizamos tres puntos sensibles en los abordajes de la temática indígena en el contexto escolar: la noción de autenticidad, la relación con el Estado-nación y la pertenencia a la tierra. El análisis demuestra que las luchas territoriales indígenas, en su dimensión cosmopolítica, y el marco del multinaturalismo ofrecen herramientas potentes para la construcción de prácticas educativas anticoloniales. Dichas prácticas no solo desafían el excepcionalismo humano de las ontologías occidentales, sino que también amplían el imaginario político-pedagógico, configurándose como contribuciones esenciales para enfrentar el colapso ecológico.

Palabras clave: Cuestiones indígenas. Escuelas. Giro ontológico. Multinaturalismo. Colapso ecológico.

Faced with the tragic health crisis among the Yanomami people in recent years, Kopenawa (2023), an important leader of this people, states that alongside denouncing the persistent colonial violence, it is also necessary to speak about the beauty of the Yanomami. The author argues that the horror to which the Yanomami and so many other Indigenous peoples have been and are subjected, often attributed by a prejudiced view of their way of life, says much more about non-Indigenous people than about the Yanomami themselves. The portrayal of Indigenous peoples as defined by absence is widespread not only in mainstream media, but also within schools.

However, Kopenawa argues that the Yanomami way of life ensured an abundant existence for many centuries and is being destroyed precisely by the extractivism of the white people, the "people of merchandise," who produce scarcity by destroying peoples and lands. The Yanomami know more than 160 species of edible wild plants, meticulously observe the behavior of over 80 game animals, collect 30 different varieties of wild honey; in a game, children can name more than 200 types of flowers (Kopenawa, 2023). Yanomami life with the forests is an art that carries much accumulated knowledge. Yet, in schools, this way of life is often portrayed as something stuck in the past or simply marked by scarcity.

For Kopenawa, in the face of colonial violence, respect for his people will not be won solely through pity or commiseration. Commitment to his people's struggles is strengthened by the admiration for their unique way of creating worlds, but this is not mobilized as a synonym for an exoticizing multiculturalism that empties and depoliticizes resistances, as Silvia Cusicanqui (2021) has already warned. In this sense, one of Davi Kopenawa's powerful statements is (2019, p. 145): "For us, politics is something else." He draws attention to the shamanic critique of the rampant destruction of the abundance of living forests full of xapiris (Kopenawa; Albert, 2015).

Drawing on the challenges posed by these Yanomami thinkers, we ask: what if we thought that both politics and education could also be "something else," displaced by Indigenous issues? In what way do Indigenous peoples appear or are silenced in schools? Is it possible to adress the effects of colonial destruction and the resistances, theories, and beauties of Indigenous peoples in schools? What are the possibilities of weaving pluriversal policies

and pedagogies (Minoia; Castro-Sotomayor, 2024), open to the plurality of anticolonial ways of being and living? The "ontological turn" in Anthropology seeks precisely to take seriously the thoughts of extra-modern collectives, unfolding the notion that politics can be "something else," what they call political ontology. Could such propositions also help us reflect on Indigenous peoples in schools?

In this sense, we understand that the possibility of engaging with Indigenous issues in schools, not merely as "beliefs" to be tolerated from disappearing societies, but as means for amplifying the contemporary and fundamental contributions of these peoples to education, is an even more urgent task in the context of ecological collapse. This multifaceted collapse is a capitalist crisis that is also ontological, as it is related to a civilizational model, a way of being (Escobar, 2014). Confronted with this, how can we weave educational practices that widen the cracks in the face of the ecological collapse caused by the "people of merchandise," who only accept their world as legitimate?

More than definitively answering these questions, our intention is to open dialogues, building bridges between the fields of political ontology and education to reflect on Indigenous propositions in schools. There is a gap between these fields, with scarce debates and initial connections. However, there is a context that calls for mutual and meaningful collaboration (Taddei; Gamboggi, 2016).

In this sense, we understand "Indigenous issues" not as a problem to be solved by the national society – the so-called "Indian question" in the terms criticized by Viveiros de Castro (1999) – but as a diverse set of inquiries, critiques, and cosmopolitics that challenge the ontological foundations of the modern-capitalist-colonial project of education and civilization. In this direction, we evoke the proposition of multinaturalism, formulated within the ontological turn in Anthropology, as a conceptual key capable of highlighting the coexistence of multiple worlds and problematizing the foundations of modern pedagogies. "Indigenous issues" should, therefore, be understood as potent interpellations, which demand from the school and the so-called "encompassing society" a profound repositioning in the face of the ontological plurality that characterizes the struggles and modes of existence of Indigenous peoples.

Thus, our proposal is to present a brief discussion on Indigenous issues in schools, followed by an analysis of some contributions of the ontological turn in Anthropology, highlighting multinaturalism as an analytical tool with pedagogical implications. Finally, we connect these two perspectives to explore how the dialogue between Indigenous struggles and ontological pluralism can open paths for anticolonial educational practices, expanding the political-pedagogical imagination and offering horizons of resistance in the face of the ongoing ecological collapse.

Schools and Indigenous Issues

In Brazil's primary and secondary education system, considerable advances occurred with federal law nº 11,645 of March 10th 2008, which made the teaching of Afro-Brazilian, African, and Indigenous culture and history mandatory. Nonetheless this legislation faces many challenges for effective implementation in the daily life of schools. It is possible to see that Indigenous knowledge and ways of life still appear timidly, usually brought in through the individual attitude of a teacher interested in the theme and, more rarely, through broad and collective institutional action (Paladino; Russo, 2016). Furthermore, the *curricula* of universities that prepare teachers often do not focus on this theme. For these reasons among others, we see that, beyond the scarcity of discussions on the Indigenous theme, it's treatment has not changed much in recent decades.

There is a recurring way of addressing Indigenous peoples in schools, which is restricted to isolated actions, such as the famous "Indian Day" (in Brazil, April 19th). On this date, it is common for children to paint themselves and wear feathers, which ends up reproducing a superficial image of the "generic, folklorized Indian" (Paladino; Russo, 2016). Such practices, besides being stereotypical, fail to account for the enormous diversity of over 305 ethnic groups existing in Brazil, not to mention the plurality of peoples throughout Latin America.

Overcoming this reductionism requires rethinking the Indigenous presence in schools beyond isolated commemorative dates, which implies confronting the very colonial logic that structures the school institution. This

concerns the functioning of the "one-world world," which operates by an exclusive model, arrogating access to the only truth and relegating other worlds to the condition of beliefs (Law, 2015). In this sense, the school, with its roots in the Western modern project, tends to reproduce a disciplinary bias, historically playing a colonizing role in its interactions with Indigenous peoples.

Within this horizon, a broad debate about the potentialities and limitations of Indigenous school education takes place. On one hand, it is necessary to recognize that many Indigenous peoples have orality and bodily transformations as fundamental elements of their educational practices, which can conflict with an institution centered on writing and the domestication of bodies. On the other hand, the demand for differentiated school education has become a central agenda of Indigenous movements, who recognize it as a space for strengthening struggles when built from their own questions and cosmologies (Cusicanqui, 2021).

Given this reality, thinkers like Eliel Benites (2014), Daniel Munduruku (2012), and Celia Xacriabá (2020) have found different answers to consider whether it is possible to build school education for Indigenous peoples that does not reinforce its colonizing bias, understanding that the education of Indigenous peoples, like that of non-Indigenous peoples, goes beyond school. These challenges are also brought and translated into the context of non-Indigenous schools. How can schools compose with different worlds? How to open the school space to Indigenous worlds? Is it possible for Indigenous voices to be present in non-Indigenous schools? We understand that the school finds its most potent meaning when it enables broadening horizons, reforesting imaginations, and fostering compositions between different scientific and traditional knowledges.

From this perspective it is important to highlight the tensions and coexistences that cut across schools. As a modern institution, the school is linked, especially in its origins, to an assimilationist nation-building project. However, schools and universities are increasingly called to dialogue with the knowledges of Indigenous peoples, as we can observe in initiatives like the Encontro de Saberes (Meeting of Knowledges), the implementation of affirmative action policies, among others. The struggles of Indigenous peoples, as well as other anti-racist fronts, have played a fundamental role in questioning the colonizing

bias often present in school knowledge, besides questioning the civilizational model responsible for an unprecedented ecological collapse (Escobar, 2014).

Alliances between different peoples and knowledges in the wake of a phenomenon like the ecological collapse, which is global, are a fundamental contemporary challenge (Almeida, 2013). In this sense, we propose thinking of schools as spaces for the coexistence of temporalities and ways of life in modernity. We follow here the notion of coexistence, recovered from Aymara philosophy by Cusicanqui (2021), which points to multiple differences between Indigenous worlds and their opposites, which do not merge but antagonize and complement each other. It is a movement of inhabiting contradictions, not of integration. The author draws attention to a ch'ixi coexistence from the Andean world:

> The notion of Ch'ixi obeys the Aymara idea of something that is and is not at the same time. A ch'ixi gray color is and is not white at the same time; it is white and also black, its opposite [...] it conjugates the Indian world in its opposite, without ever mixing with it (Cusicanqui, 2021, p. 35, *our translation*).

Discussing Indigenous issues in schools is essential because these peoples still face grave violence. This point involves both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people, as it concerns the erasure of differences and the continuities of colonialism in an ethnocidal and ecocidal society. And, returning to Kopenawa's provocations, we can also affirm that Indigenous issues can be addressed for their contemporaneity, as they stem from profound accumulated knowledges, which can even displace what is usually understood as politics and education. We then enter the field of political ontology.

The Ontological Turn in Anthropology

Although debates on political ontology may seem abstract and distant from the daily practices of teachers in elementary education, it is possible to perceive their contributions to the educational field, especially regarding Indigenous propositions in schools. The "ontological turn" has been widely discussed, mainly in anthropology, with resonances in other areas of knowledge

over the last 30 years. This movement seeks to displace the centrality of the concept of culture, traditionally contrasted with the notion of nature, considered a common and immutable background. The ontological turn criticizes the dominant cultural relativism in anthropology, which supposes the division between multiple representations (cultures) of a single world (nature) and, consequently, is based on the separation between beliefs (usually attributed to extra-modern peoples) and facts (the world of the moderns, considered universal). From a different perspective, the ontological turn seeks to recognize extra-modern collectives as legitimate realities and theoretical agents that transform anthropological theories – and not just as beliefs or representations to be interpreted against a common background. In this sense, the difference in perspective is not what impedes the relationship, but what founds and impels it (Viveiros de Castro, 2002).

One of the political propositions of this "rotation of perspective" is that the political-economic domination of the "national society" and its state apparatus over Indigenous peoples should not lead to a theoretical privilege of this "national society" (Viveiros de Castro, 1999). This privilege, present even in part of progressive social sciences, would reinforce an absolute and heteronomous encompassment of peoples politically dominated by the Nation-State, seen only as victims or possessors of a "mutilated form of legitimate culture," to use Bourdieu's expression (1994). Without disregarding the sociopolitical and cultural violence of "contact" with the national society, it is understood that it is not only Indigenous societies that transform or "lose" culture through the process of "contact," but also the so-called "encompassing society" – as Marshall Sahlins (1981) already warned, when dealing with the indigenization of modernity. In this respect, there is no unilateral inclusion or encompassment of Western societies in relation to extra-modern peoples, but relations between parts that mutually influence and modify each other.

Building bridges from ontological politics to education, we recall that indigenization is also recovered by Célia Xacriabá (2020) when reflecting on Indigenous schools in her people:

> We use the concept [indigenization] to talk about the strategies with which the Xakriabá people deal with the school that comes to us and how we re-signify it. Sahlins presents the category of

> indigenization seeking to differentiate it from the concept of acculturation – and this interests us, above all, as a way to counter the preconceived image that we, Indigenous peoples, would be 'acculturated' (Xacriabá, 2020, p. 112, *our translation*).

By emphasizing Indigenous participation in pedagogical practice as a means of decolonizing education, Xacriabá counters the notion that the national society (and, consequently, the school as a colonizing institution) would promote absolute acculturation or unilateral encompassment. One must also look at the movements of indigenization in schools, that is, how Indigenous participation and movements transform schools.

Following the debate on the political character of the "ontological turn" in anthropology, we understand that ontology is an anti-epistemological and anti-cultural war machine (Holbraad; Pedersen; Viveiros de Castro, 2019). In this regard, ontology would not simply be another name for culture, but for nature, in articulation with what has been conventionally called multinaturalism or Amerindian perspectivism. In this experiment with Indigenous conceptual imaginations is implied a conception, common to many peoples of the continent, according to which the world is inhabited by different species of subjects or persons, human and other-than-human. This is irreducible to cultural relativism, as there is no third term that assures a group or species a fixed position as subject or a gradient of ontological dignity (Lima, 2005).

In Amerindian perspectivism, all inhabitants of the cosmos are considered people, subjects unto themselves. Humanity – or even what we call "culture" – would not be an attribute of a single species, but something immanent, which remains "in the background." What varies, therefore, is not humanity, but what we commonly call "nature": the environment, the bodies. Hence, Amerindian perspectivism differs from "multiculturalism" and "mononaturalist" ontologies, pointing towards a "multinaturalism" (Viveiros de Castro, 2002). Or, in the terms of Marisol de La Cadena's questions (2024): what if the basis of what we call the common good – nature as a resource and the universality of nature – is in fact an uncommon ontological basis? The ontologies of peoples point to different possibilities of composing territories and composing territories with the beings of the earth (De La Cadena, 2024).

Therefore, it is multinaturalism, as a political unfolding of the ontological

turn, that offers us the lenses to displace the assimilationist and mononaturalist vision that anchors the colonial project of the modern school. It is this tool that will allow us, in the next section, to analyze "Indigenous issues" beyond mere cultural inclusion, understanding them as the proposition of other worlds.

Experimenting with Contributions from the "Ontological Turn"

Considering, on one hand, the mobilizations of many worlds in resistance and, on the other, the growth of the far-right in Latin America, which defends agribusiness, extractivism, and amplifies environmental racism, we understand that debates on Indigenous issues in schools are traversed by "sensitive themes" (Mével; Tutiaux-Guillon, 2013). These "sensitive themes" are considered "hot," "live" issues that are disputed in society and present challenges for teachers' daily lives. They mobilize affects, often divergent, and sometimes even positions of hatred, but also positions of resistance. Indigenous themes, in particular, are a sensitive topic because they mobilize prejudices and minority struggles, which are not limited to survival but aim to defend and affirm their own re-existence.

One proposal for addressing these sensitive themes is precisely to open the classroom to controversies and listening, without shying away from a discussion that deconstructs prejudices, anchored in different knowledges (Gil; Eugênio, 2018). In this sense, we highlight three sensitive points about Indigenous peoples that seem fundamental to be worked on in the classroom.

The first one is: "*is the* real Indian *the one who lives naked in the forests?*" There is a widely spread prejudice based on the idea that Indigenous peoples, to be authentic, must be exactly like the Indigenous peoples of the pre-colonial period (Collet; Paladino; Russo, 2014). In this logic, they are seen as backward, primitive, and therefore need to be assimilated. The Indigenous condition would be understood as a transient state to be overcome, with the idea of integrating a single Brazilian people. Thus, if an Indigenous person uses a cell phone, jeans, or is involved in politics, they would no longer be considered Indigenous. As if Indigenous people needed to cling to the past to maintain their belonging to a people, something that is not required, for example, of a European Portuguese person. There is no expectation that

a 21st-century Portuguese person has the same collective practices as a Portuguese person who arrived in the American continent five centuries ago. In this colonizing view, it seems that Indigenous people are always ceasing to be Indigenous, and there would be no possibility of returning to that condition. This disregards all the important processes of retaking and ethnic re-emergence that have occurred in Brazil in recent decades.

Regarding this sensitive point, it seems interesting to provoke students with the idea that all peoples, modern or extra-modern, are in constant transformation. In this sense, Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (2002) draws attention to the "anthropophagic" bias of Indigenous peoples. Recalling the work of the modernist writer Oswald de Andrade (2011), the anthropologist points out how anthropophagy, one of the greatest signs of barbarism for Western civilization, carries a profound philosophy. Although the anthropophagic rite of eating the enemy's flesh is no longer present in contemporary Indigenous peoples, the anthropophagic philosophy focused on alterity, on devouring the "other," persists. Different from the logic of Western civilization, which is turned inward and where the definition of identity is "being the same", anthropophagy allows for continuous transformation in the relationship with white people, without necessarily leading to a process of assimilation of Indigenous peoples. The reinterpretation of Tupi cannibalism points not to an "original," "Brazilian," or "mestizo" synthesis, but to an interest in the "position of the enemy," in difference (Viveiros de Castro, 1986). According to the anthropophagic logic, it would therefore be possible, for example, to appropriate technologies or other attributes of the white world on their own terms, without ceasing to be Indigenous. Thus, Indigenous peoples would not have their existence encompassed by the national society.

We then arrive at another sensitive point that commonly appears in schools and is also linked to an assimilationist view: considering Indigenous peoples as "the first Brazilians," privileging the dimension of the Nation-State over the Indians. Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (1999) underscores that there are two conflicting interpretations of what it means to "be Indian" in Brazil: one that refers to the "Indians in Brazil," emphasizing the Indigenous condition of these peoples, beyond and despite the Nation-State; and another that refers to the "Indians of Brazil" and privileges the Brazilian dimension of the Indians living in the country. The first interpretation seems more fruitful to be discussed in the

classroom, as it allows displacing the idea that Indians are, above all, "brazilians", to think about Indigenous peoples from their own questions.

The displacement from the "Indian question" to "Indigenous issues," a central point of this article, implies understanding that the relationship between Indians and whites is only one of the relationships (and not necessarily the most important) among the networks of relationships that Indigenous peoples establish with humans and non-humans. This interpretation does not disregard the devastating effects of colonial violence but seeks to avoid reproducing them, emphasizing Indigenous voices.

By privileging "Indigenous issues" in the educational process, we necessarily approach the land. We then arrive at our third sensitive point. There is a prejudiced discourse that Indians are large landowners, associating them with a threat to national territory protection. This discourse is wrong not only because of the small amount of land allocated to Indigenous peoples but also because it disregards the historical relationships these peoples have with the land. To deepen this question, we recall the already cited Davi Kopenawa (2019):

> Our Brazil is so big – very big! – and one person alone wants all of Brazil to become powerful. The invaders and miners have no land. The miner has no job to plant, to care for the children, to raise the children. Since they have no job, they invade our Indigenous Lands. [...] who is deforesting the Amazon rainforest? The ox. The ox rules. Because the ox needs to feed. So that's why the rancher deforests the Amazon rainforest. [...] Mining knocks down the trees, pushes everything away, removing the skin of the earth. (...) I tell everything that needs to be protected, preserved, and respected. Because for me, since I was small, I found the beauty of our ecology. I grew up with it... So let's conserve the heart of the earth. Let's take care of it as we care for our family. The forest, it is linked to us like a brother, like family (Kopenawa, 2019, n/p, *our translation*).

In this short excerpt, Kopenawa makes explicit who is attacking the forests: mining and agribusiness. Such enterprises of the people of merchandise cause rampant destruction, very different from the organic relationship that Indigenous peoples have with the land. In the words of Krenak (2019), Indigenous peoples are those "bound to the Earth." By bringing Indigenous

interpellations to school, we can discuss the strong meaning that the land has for these peoples, not as a mere resource, but anchored in a fundamental cosmological and political dimension. This allows displacing, even, the notion of human exceptionalism that permeates Western ontology. As Bruce Albert (1995) states, the struggle for land not only guarantees the permanence of a physical space essential for the existence of Indigenous peoples but also preserves a web of social coordinates and cosmological exchanges that constitute and ensure their existence.

Conclusions

The articulation proposed in this article between the ontological turn – especially its multinaturalist proposition – and education has allowed us to rethink the place of Indigenous peoples in schools. Far from figuring as "themes of the past" or objects of assimilation, Indigenous issues reveal themselves as urgent theoretical tools for the present. Our analysis demonstrates that the struggle for land, understood in its cosmopolitical dimension and articulated within the framework of multinaturalism, radically opposes the extractivism of the "one-world world" and displaces the human exceptionalism that anchors so many Western pedagogies.

The provocations of Kopenawa (2023) that opened this article continue to echo: politics and education can, indeed, be "something else." The path to this reinvention necessarily passes through the recognition of the contemporary contributions of Indigenous peoples. They do not speak to us of an idyllic past but offer fundamental conceptual tools to critique the civilizational project responsible for ecological collapse and to imagine and weave possible futures.

Thus, we conclude that "taking school beyond walls" and "playing in nature," pedagogical practices increasingly common these days, can – and should – be transformed by multinaturalist propositions. It is not about promoting contact with a homogeneous "nature" passive to exploitation, but about assuming an ethical-political commitment to the struggles that defend multiple worlds, where mountains are teachers and forests are inhabited by xapiris. It is in this key that the school can, effectively, broaden horizons, reforest

imaginations, and foster compositions between knowledges, becoming a space of ch'ixi coexistence – where worlds antagonize, complement, and can also resist together in the face of ecological and civilizational collapse. When our political imagination seems suffocated by the logic of the "people of merchandise," Indigenous issues and dialogue with political ontology show themselves capable of expanding it.

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