

The time to learn

The Indian program

The series *Anthropology, History and Education*, in four volumes, is the result of a thematic project that discusses indigenous education

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In the beginning it was the spoken word, but it wasn't easy to understand it. "I remained with my ear close to the savage's mouth but without being able to distinguish syllables or perceive vowels or consonants", wrote father Vieira on his difficulty in trying to understand the Indians. The original sin of indigenous education had been born: teaching them how to speak Portuguese, moving them away from their own culture and negating any dialogue between the differences. At the epicenter there was the school. "The educational institution was fundamental in the redesigning of the Brazilian Native people, right from the catechism to positivism, since everything was always linked to the State", explains Lux Vidal.

The anthropologist is one of the more than twenty researchers of Mari – USP's Indigenous Educational Group –, set up in 1995 to contemplate forms of education that

would promote an inter ethnic dialogue between Indians and non-Indians. However, for them the speaking word was not enough. "There was always a lapse between the anthropological practice and theory, in order to think out this question, to advance in the area and to give some return to the Indians on the results of our studies", Lux says. The result of this practical desire is contained in the recently published four volumes of the *Antropologia e Educação* – (*Anthropology and Education*) series.

Antropologia, História e Educação – (*Anthropology, History and Education*) edited by Aracy Lopes da Silva and Mariana Kawall Leal Ferreira), *Práticas Pedagógicas na Escola Indígenas*, (*Pedagogic Practices in Indigenous Schools* – (the same editors), *Crianças Indígenas: Ensaios Antropológicos* (*Indigenous Children: Anthropological Essays* – edited by Aracy Lopes, Ana Vera Lopes Macedo and Ângela Nunes) and *Idéias Mate-*



The Indians according to a sketch by Cândido Portinari: "The village is no longer isolated in a globalized world, and the Indians are looking for information", says Lux Vidal

máticas de Povos Culturalmente Distintos, (Mathematical Ideas of Culturally Distinct Peoples – edited by Mariana Ferreira) have just recently been published by Editora Global, with the support of FAPESP. Bringing together various articles from members of the Mari group, the books are the product of an ambitious thematic project launched in 1995 and financed through FAPESP, *Anthropology, History and Education: The Indigenous Question and Schooling*.

In the middle of the process there was a terrible loss: the researcher Aracy Lopes died in the year 2000. "The completion of the thematic project and these books are due largely to the dedication of Aracy, who knew how to bring everything involving the project together", praises Lux Vidal. "The theme of indigenous education is not something new, but thanks to these recent efforts it has a new spirit and direction" the anthropologist believes.

The current directional tendency arrived at the right time for contemplating a new challenge, globalization. If before it was necessary to integrate the Indians into their and our culture, today's education needs to bring them onto the world. "The village is no longer isolated in the globalized world. The Indians are being instructed in this idea and want to participate in this coming together without putting aside what they themselves are", Lux analyzes. Once again, the epicenter of all is the school, the privileged place for this discussion, this time within a positive context.

Domination - "One of the most constant demands by the indigenous movement organized in Brazil over the last two decades, besides the question of land rights and of health care, is regarding education", observes Mariana Kawall Ferreira. After five hundred years of seeing the school used as an

instrument of domination and of forced integration, indigenous peoples want to relate themselves with Brazilian society starting from a new base. However, they had to wait for the change in the 1988 Constitution that recognized them as Brazilians with full rights, among them being the right to their own language and culture. It was a long struggle.

Mariana Ferreira recalls how the catechism was used in a movement towards the cultural annihilation of the Indians in Colonial Brazil. The obligatory teaching of Portuguese was a means of bringing the indigenous population into Christian civilization, “concentrating efforts to destroy native institutions, such as the medicine men, the family relations system, installing relations of submission and domination, and perpetuating social inequalities”. The native Indians were only trained for certain types of work such as cheap labor for their colonial masters.

Mariana further observes that it was only in 1910 that the Brazilian State, under the influence of the positivists, began to show the minimal concern for the indigenous culture and language, through the implantation of the Indian Protection Service (SPI in the Portuguese acronym). Schools began to teach less religion, but still wanted the Indians prepared just to integrate them into the work force. In 1967, with the establishment of The National Indian Foundation – Funai in the Portuguese acronym, which substituted the SPI, bilingual teaching came onto the government’s agenda as part of its indigenous policy. In 1991, during the Fernando Collor de Melo’s administration, educational control was removed from the foundation and handed over to the Ministry of Education.

A new legal decree guaranteed “that the educational actions directed towards indigenous populations have to be founded on the recognition of their social organizations, customs, language, beliefs and traditions, and in the processes themselves of the transmission of knowledge”. The road towards a differentiated schooling had been opened as well as for indigenous teachers. “This new form of education brought together a worry about maintaining the identity of the Indian and at the same time of giving to him those so desired

new understandings of non-Indian society”, Lux Vidal evaluates.

The native population shortly realized that, as well as gaining knowledge towards establishing equal rights relationships with the non-Indians, they could also use the “white man’s” institution of schooling with new meaning, closer to their reality and necessity. The old trick of destructive catechism hit back: teaching could help the Indians in the preservation of their traditions, customs and language. “Today the Indian teachers have the help of anthropologists in order to think of ways of creating their education, without leaving aside the necessary instrument of ‘succeeding in the white man’s world’”, analyzes Lux.

Thus, besides learning Portuguese and becoming bilingual, the new generation also learn to dominate mathematical operations (within, to be clear, the Indian spirit of an understanding of mathematics, linked to a delicate native cosmogony).

“Curiously, for many of them it was a surprise to discover themselves true Indians as I could see on a visit to Oiapoque. Through the work of rescuing their language and history, many could rediscover within themselves the ‘lost’ identity of the indigenous native”, the anthropologist says. That is the reason for the statistical increase in the number of Indians in Brazil, which jumped in a few years from 350,000 to 850,000. “In reality, what happened was a recognition, through the new indigenous educational system, of many who were Indians”, explains Lux Vidal. In the end, it is now the indigenous population themselves who are producing their schooling material, their reading books, maps and atlas, reporting their version in their own words, of the country’s history.

But not everything in the garden is rosy, the anthropologist warns. Especially in the concept of differentiated schooling. “Many Indians think that they are getting a narrower and inferior schooling. Furthermore, there is a lot of formal apparatus that holds them back from real necessary growth. It would be pointless preparing them for university entrance exams, since they would not pass. Nor would this be good for them”, she advises. “Few reach university, and

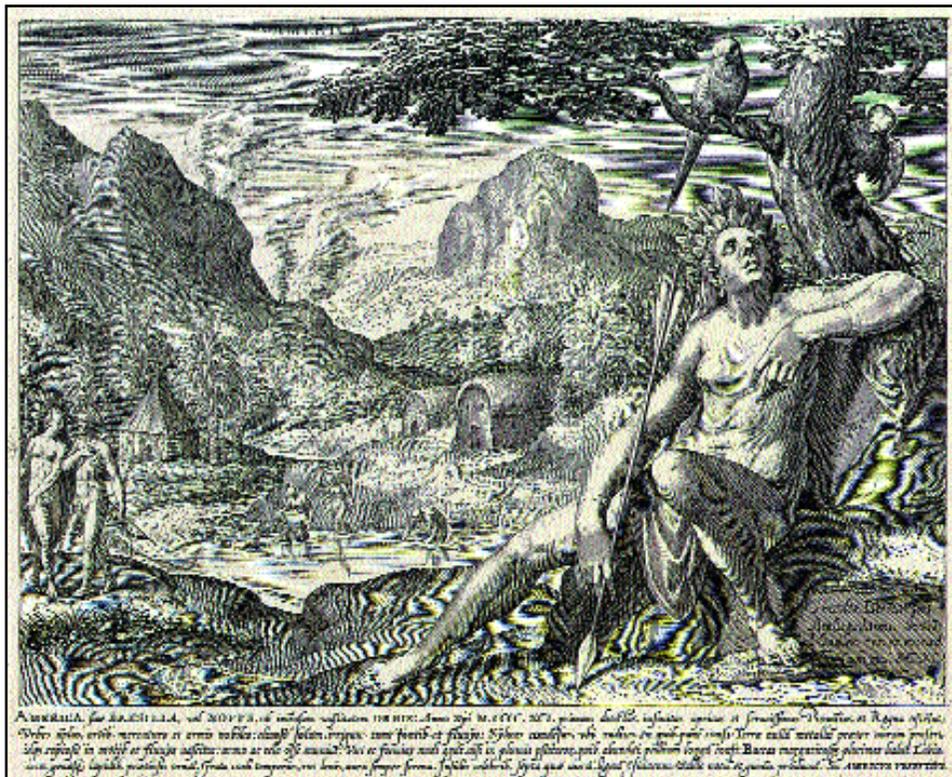
the vast majority prefers to remain in their villages and thus one needs to think about a schooling specific towards this end. There is lots of potential for social/environmental research among the Indians, the analysis and cataloguing of the fauna and flora, etc., that they, most certainly, could carry out and carry out well”, adds Lux.

Fragility - Above all of this, the anthropologist fears for a lack of future political desire to continue the enterprises related within the four volumes of the *Anthropology and Education* series. “There is, as the researchers narrate in the books, immense fragility in this system. And the indigenous population is increasing and wants top class schooling.” she says. In the opinion of the researcher, the election year has already brought with it a number of damaging situations in various phases of the project, which were left aside and relegated to a second plan.

Lux Vidal also says that it is complicated to keep the teachers for a long time in an area and various indigenous teacher organizations ask for, and do not receive, government assistance so that this state of affairs can be changed. If this is not the case, the conquests could very easily be lost. The formation of non-Indian teachers is also required so as to think through the question and to help the process to continue.

Above everything else, the researcher recalls, the situation of the indigenous child has to be particularly be studied, the theme of one of the books resulting from the thematic project. In the end, education has always brought with it friction between generations. “The elderly feel themselves humbled by the teaching acquired by the young”, she relates. “However, if we think deeply, the same thing is happening within our reality, as the Internet divides the generations”, she adds.

Speaking about “our world”, the project *Anthropology, History and Education* pays equal attention to the other side of the coin: the stereotyped vision of the non-Indians towards indigenous populations. White society learns in school to look upon the natives as “under privileged, goodly people, who have no desire to leave the “stone age” and must be preserved as primitives”, Lux points out. “This is just as bad as preju-



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The idealized vision of the “good savage”: today the Indians suffer from stereotyping of being the victim, equally damaging to them

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Aracy: project and books owe a lot to the researcher

talk about indigenous education without taking into account that within these populations there are large differences and needs. All of this is present as discussion material in the thematic project” she reminds us.

To top it all, Lux Vidal points out that indigenous education has brought unexpected fruits, such as the political inclusion of the indigenous populations. “The Indian vote is expressive in certain places and for this reason politicians go after them, which to a certain extent is good, since it forces the legis-

lature to also think about the indigenous question”, the professor says. However, the destiny of the indigenous populations should fundamentally rest in the hands of the natives themselves.

Community - As it was observed in a statement at the 1st National Meeting of Project Coordinators in the Area of Indigenous Education in 1997: “The family and the community are the people responsible for the education of their children. It is in the family that they learn to look after their health, the geography of the forest, of the rivers and hills; they learn the mathematics and

the geometry to make canoes. There is no selection or repetition of a school term. A piece of specific knowledge is at the service and the reach of all. All are teachers and students at the same time.” the document observes. “School is not the only place where learning occurs. School is not the constructed building or the students’ notebooks. Schooling is knowledge, wisdom. As well the community keeps hold of its wisdom in order for it to be communicated, transmitted and distributed”, the text wraps up.

The issue is indeed complex. “It is necessary to train and to value professionals directed towards the community itself, aiming our autonomy and so that the schools serve as instruments for the permanence of the young people in our villages and not as open doorways”, echoed the final document of the 9th Meeting of Indigenous Teachers from the Amazon, Roraima and Acre, States. Today in Brazil there are still 218 indigenous peoples, speaking 180 different languages and native dialects. Furthermore, Oswald de Andrade was correct: “We Brazilians never absorbed the catechism” It’s just as well.

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