

# Knowledge and Scientific Practices in the Public Sphere: Anthropology, Gender and Sexuality<sup>1</sup>

DOI  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.11606/2179-0892.ra.2018.145582>

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## ABSTRACT

In the last decades, gender and sexuality have circumscribed an innovative field of increasing intellectual production, becoming at the same time a significant focus of political action for anthropologists in Brazil. In order to put into perspective the disputes that are at stake in the current Brazilian context – in which the knowledge we produce has been severely attacked – we will revisit some documents of public positioning, published by the Gender and Sexuality Committee of the Brazilian Association of Anthropology (ABA) over the last few years. We propose a reflection on the kind of knowledge we have produced about gender and sexuality, how it has impacted the public debate about these issues and how it has affected the ways in which our own scientific practice has been socially perceived and evaluated.

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## KEYWORDS

Gender, Sexuality,  
Brazilian  
Anthropology,  
Scientific Practice,  
Ideology

In the last decades gender and sexuality have become a field of increasing and innovative intellectual production in Brazilian anthropology. Unsurprisingly, they have gained considerable political significance for anthropologists either individually or through the Brazilian Association of Anthropology (ABA) and its Gender and Sexuality Committee. To put the discussions that are at stake in Brazil's troubling current context into perspective, where the knowledge we produce has been suffering severe attacks, in this paper we shall revisit certain documents publicly released over the last years by ABA's Gender and Sexuality Committee. Our intention is to raise awareness and provoke reflection on the type of knowledge we have produced on gender and sexuality, how it has impacted the public debate on these issues and how it has affected the ways in which our own scientific practice has been socially perceived and evaluated.

The Gender and Sexuality Committee was formed as a result of the consultancy services that ABA has been developing since the mid-2000s in response to a political demand for the increased visibility and recognition of claims and demands put forward by feminist and LGBT movements. The creation of the Committee and its subsequent actions illustrate the Association's public practices, and how throughout its existence it has created various consultancy services, commissions and themed committees to respond to different agendas related to its main themes of interest and to make well supported statements at critical political moments.

Political engagement has been a hallmark of anthropology in Brazil. This is no novelty, but has become especially visible since the late 1970s when the process of "democratic openness" established in the country, implied, in Eunice Durham's words, "a growing politicisation of our social universe" (Durham, 1986: 27), affecting the sciences in general, and particularly anthropology. For Durham, as the populations studied by the field gained visibility as political subjects or actors, organising movements and demanding participation in national life, anthropology itself was renewed and reinvigorated in the country's democratisation process. As she wrote, over thirty years ago:

*The recent success of anthropology is certainly linked to the fact that today these underprivileged minorities emerge as new political actors, organize movements and demand participation in national life from which they have been secularly excluded (Durham, 1986: 18).*

At the same time, the anthropologist also advised that politicisation posed other challenges to the production of knowledge. If, on one hand, political engagement required the incorporation of the experiences, feelings and conflicts of the people being studied and of the anthropologist him/herself,

on the other, it also highlighted the urgent need to deepen reflection on these new 'subjects'/objects' of knowledge and research, as well as on the conflicts, diversities and inequalities in the research relationships themselves (Durham, 1986; Machado, 2015).

From this perspective, political engagement is not an obstacle to the basic commitment to knowledge, rigor and critique. On the contrary, in addition to having become an ethical imperative, it has allowed practitioners of anthropology to refine the understanding of their own craft by questioning the circumstances and conditions under which their own rhetorics emerged and, on occasion, touched on tempestuous territory. Anthropology's specific expertise in collecting and recording social experiences, based on the "symbolic communication that assumes and restores basic processes responsible for creating meanings and groups" (Cardoso, 1986: 103), makes it especially sensitive and accustomed to the web of interactions and transactions that enable the work of scientific research, with evident political implications. Anthropological research thus constitutes a space for intense exchange of ideas, languages and concerns between different "situated positions" (Haraway, 1995). Drawing attention to this means recognising the complex and multifaceted dialogue from which a kind of knowledge is produced that assumes that the changing interfaces between the researchers' placed understandings and those of populations in focus must be considered - always keeping the social and political reasons for its significance in perspective.

We consider it especially important to raise these issues at a time when anthropologists are at the center of a whirlwind which places the relationship between political involvement and knowledge production under scrutiny. After following the consolidation and expansion of the field of anthropological studies in the last two decades, in correlation with the growing autonomy of sexuality and the identifications and expressions of gender as central spheres of claiming and exercising rights, we now face the results not only of greater visibility and social transformations related to women and LGBT people, especially in terms of jurisprudence and public policies, but also of the initiatives and reactions that organise against these transformations. We are pulled into a context where the rights of the political subjects we work with are being attacked and the legitimacy of the anthropological knowledge we have been producing in-field with them for gender and sexuality studies is being questioned.

A brief assessment of ABA Gender and Sexuality Committee's work, through notes, letters and reports produced in the current decade (2010), shows how we have reacted to a succession of attacks related to gender and sexuality issues that sprung from sources ranging from the media to legislative power and have taken center stage in public debate at certain times. In recent years, ABA's public statements have concerned themes such as:

- gender-based violence, criticising the media and institutional treatment of cases of sexual violence, including episodes of “gang rape”, as “a form of humiliation and control of women and of bodies that may be feminized” (ABA, 2016a)<sup>1</sup>;
- attacks on sexual and reproductive rights by lawmakers, criticising initiatives such as the Statute of the Unborn Child (*Estatuto do Nascituro*) and PL 5069/2013, which aim to: restrict the reach of services in hospitals intended for women who are victims of sexual violence, criminalize advertising abortion methods or the provision of guidance and instruction on how to practice abortion, even in cases accepted by law. The Committee emphasised the autonomy or self-determination of women in decisions regarding their reproductive life (ABA, 2015a, 2015b)<sup>2</sup>;
- violence against LGBT people, condemning, for example, the murder of the anthropologist Cleides Antonio Amorim, from Universidade Federal do Tocantins<sup>3</sup>, (ABA, 2012)<sup>4</sup> and publicly criticising Legislative Decree 234/2011 that aims to revoke the Resolution of the Federal Counsel of Psychology against the use of conversion therapy - the so-called “gay cure” (ABA, 2013, 2017)<sup>5</sup>. The Committee emphasised the urgent need to eradicate prejudice, hatred and discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity in Brazil;
- proposals for changes in legislation on prostitution, criticising the trend towards increased criminalisation of sex work and publicly fighting accusations and threats directed at leaders of prostitution movements, as well as at researchers on the theme (ABA, 2016b).

It is important to emphasise that these stances are based on conceptual elaborations with long-standing accumulated empirical support. In spite of our internal divisions regarding theories and methodologies, such elaborations reflect the foundational procedures of anthropology as a scientific practice, which imply taking a certain stance on the very nature of the knowledge that we produce. In general, we can assert that anthropological knowledge treats any conceptions of a person as relative, those supposedly based on attributes such as sex, sexuality and gender, considered essential, unchangeable and universally valid. Given the empirical and conceptual foundations built by the discipline in the post-war period and the ethical and political commitment it has made to the populations it studies, we are responsible for the ongoing task of denaturalising taxonomies and classificatory practices and treating them as culturally and historically particular productions, subject to controversy and transformation.

While anthropology understands gender and sexuality as axes that arrange hierarchies and enduring social inequalities, such ordinations have not been treated as static fields of power relations, but as contentious territories. In this sense, gender and sexuality have been understood as a field of relations be-

**1** See “Nota da Associação Brasileira de Antropologia (ABA) e de seu Comitê de Gênero e Sexualidade sobre os recentes casos de estupro coletivo”, May 2016.

**2** See “Nota da Associação Brasileira de Antropologia e de seu Comitê de Gênero e Sexualidade sobre o Projeto de Lei no. 5069/2013”, October 2015.

**3** Federal University of the state of Tocantins, Brazil. (Translator’s note)

**4** See “Nota e ofício – assassinato do antropólogo Cleides Amorim: mais um dos casos de violência cotidianamente perpetrada há décadas contra gays, lésbicas, bissexuais, travestis, transexuais e transgêneros no Brasil”, February 2012.

**5** See “ABA denuncia a ‘cura gay’ – Nota do Comitê Gênero e Sexualidade encaminhada (25/06/13) ao Conselho Federal de Psicologia (CFP)”, June 2013, and “Nota de apoio à resolução 01/1999 do Conselho Federal de Psicologia, que estabelece normas de atuação para os psicólogos em relação à questão da Orientação Sexual, vedando explicitamente a participação desses profissionais em eventos e serviços que proponham tratamento e cura das homossexualidades”, October 2017.

tween socially constituted individuals in singular contexts and as elements of broader processes of social regulation and exercise of power. Its political and cultural intersections have been able to produce an impressive array of gender expressions and identifications and a variety of combinations between such expressions and desires or sexual orientation.

Indeed, gender and sexuality also emerge as a vehicle for conflicts that extrapolate its own limits (Scott, 1986) and have historically operated as catalysts for personal and social anxieties and fears that are, essentially, alien to them. This phenomenon results in the so-called “moral panics” (Weeks, 1981; Rubin, 1984), an example of which is the idea that has been built around pedophilia or the ‘sexualization’ of children and adolescents among us. This may provide a good linchpin to understand what is currently at stake. We have witnessed the growing proliferation of moral panics since President Dilma Rousseff’s decision to suspend the Homophobia-free School (*Escola sem Homofobia*) project in 2011 after pressure and protests from morally conservative parliamentarians and/or those linked to so-called religious groups in the National Congress, to the more recent attacks, which resulted in the elimination of references to gender, diversity and sexual orientation from the Education Plans across the whole country by 2015. During Michel Temer’s government in 2016 and 2017, we closely watched the discussions on the so-called “Partyless School” (*Escola sem Partido*) and the actual abolishment, by the Chamber of Deputies, of the expression “gender perspective” from the document that guides the scope of the Ministry of Women, Racial Equality and Human Rights (currently renamed the Ministry of Human Rights). Certain paranoid anxiety, amplified by social networks, is gaining momentum towards the censorship of artistic expressions and demonstrations against intellectuals, as happened with the Queer Museum exhibition in Porto Alegre and the visit of Professor Judith Butler to Brazil in 2017. So-called ‘gender ideology’ is stigmatised as a presumed plan to ‘sexualise’, corrupt or pervert innocent children and destroy ‘the’ family. Such a plan would have supposedly been concocted and orchestrated by social movements and their allies in academia, civic institutions and even within the government.

The public manifestations by ABA, clearly geared at the political sphere, were accompanied by the effort - through the organisation of forums, working groups and academic seminars, and the publication of their results in national scientific journals - to sophisticate reflection on our own practice in this empirical field and on the political circumstances we become entangled with. As a result, analyses regarding anthropological reflection on themes central to the field of gender and sexuality studies in Brazil<sup>6</sup> were produced, and more recently debates were held on ‘conservatism,’ ‘fundamentalism,’ and ‘violence.’ With the most recent emergence of the struggle against dissemination of so-called

<sup>6</sup> In 2014, the scientific journal *Cadernos Pagu* published “*Dossiê Antropologia, Gênero e Sexualidade no Brasil: Balanço e Perspectivas*”, a result of the activities organised by ABA’s Gender and Sexuality Committee, containing critical analyses of the anthropological production on Gender and Sexuality in Brazil in its various themed fields (Piscitelli, 2014). In 2017, the journal published “*Dossiê: Conservadorismo, Direitos, Moralidades e Violência*”, a result, among others, of initiatives related to ABA’s Gender and Sexuality Committee (Facchini e Sívori, 2017). In February 2016, ABA published a joint effort to produce diagnoses that considered sexual diversity and gender, family and prostitution in its special bulletin (ABA, 2016c).

'gender ideology,' which particularly mobilizes Christian leaders, dialogue is also strengthened with anthropologists working in the field of religious studies.

This last point warrants some additional considerations. ABA released critical notes and statements during episodes in which the term 'gender ideology' came into use. Despite this, it is around it that perhaps the most difficult challenges to the professional practice of anthropologists, as well as other researchers working in the field of gender and sexuality studies, are constituted today, since anthropological knowledge itself becomes accused of 'ideology.' It should be noted that in this field of study, what in fact would qualify as a kind of ideology, or at least a set of ideals - in flagrant contradiction with what the empirical data have revealed since (at least) the pioneering studies that the American anthropologist Margaret Mead (1935) led in the first half of the last century - are the very ideas held by those currently fighting 'gender ideology.' The main ones being: that there are universal ways of relating as men and women, that such manners are derived from the human anatomical-physiological apparatus and aimed at biological reproduction and, finally, that non-heterosexual relations must be treated, in the scientific field, as anomalies or diseases.

From our point of view (and without here reviewing positions that have been settled for at least half a century), this unfortunate situation deserves a reaction based on a double argument, which may seem contradictory to those unfamiliar with the field of anthropology or gender studies and sexuality. We need to find a balance between, on one hand, the claim that the knowledge we produce is necessarily positioned - politically and epistemologically - and therefore never 'neutral'; and, on the other, the defense of the independence (relative, certainly) of science and the conventions that govern it. That is, it is crucial to clarify that, invariably with political implications, what we produce is knowledge and not 'ideology' or some kind of 'opinion' that can do without the logical, conceptual and methodological rigour that we apply to the research we conduct. It is in this field that the battles must be fought, and not in the realm of moral passions, where the sexual "boogiemán", the pedophile, is evoked, who would supposedly spread 'ideologies', that is, false scientific theories, in Brazilian schools, only to satisfy their lust on children and unsuspecting teenagers.

In short, to respond to this challenge, it may be insufficient to argue that scientific neutrality is inexistent from the perspective of human rights and citizenship. It is necessary to insist on the specificity of the scientific practice that we pursue. It is necessary to remember that there is no neutral teacher and /or researcher from the perspective of the conceptions one maintains on education and on the natural and human world, because in the contemporary sciences we work with different theories or paradigms which are always provisional, incomplete and often in conflict. In the scientific field, we discuss theories, concepts and results of meth-

odologically controlled investigations. We study (describe, interpret, or explain) ideologies as yet another human manifestation. Thus we maintain constant epistemological vigilance in order to control, or at least to acknowledge, the possible interferences between the scientific theories or paradigms with which we operate and these other ideals that we call 'religious beliefs', 'political opinions', 'ideologies', 'moralities'. As it can be seen, we are not absolutely neutral when it comes to the possibility of religious beliefs or conceptions guiding, or worse, replacing, the paradigms or the scientific theories we work with. In other words, for over two centuries we have revered ideals that are desacralised, debatable and anchored in a certain empirical method and rationality. The autonomy of the scientific field, even if as a guiding principle, must therefore continue to be defended.

The 'gender ideology' fallacy reflects a political strategy of conferring the status of religious belief or particular moral position to scientific knowledge, produced through its unique methods. This is what happens when the current advocates of the existence of a 'gender ideology' attempt to label all knowledge that has been produced in the last hundred years on gender as a concept and as the structuring principle of historically specific and culturally diverse power relations, based on religious convictions and on an effort to impose these convictions on the whole of society. It is also symptomatic of defending as universal, natural and everlasting the idea that gender is binary and complementary and that there is a hierarchy between different sexual orientations, under which premise heterosexuality would, for example, have greater social value than homosexuality. We are therefore drawn inexorably to the idea that there are some kinds of people who deserve less social respect and therefore, more limited access to rights than others. That is what, in our field of studies, has been treated as gender ideology - without quotation marks. And we commonly call this *heteronormativity*.

This is, as can be seen, a poorly disguised reversal strategy that accuses knowledge of being 'ideological', only to impose a single and well-known ideology whose foundations lie in Christian morality! In view of this strategy, even if sticking to "(strictly) strategic positivism", we need to defend the legitimacy of the scientific practice and the particular branch of knowledge and reflection we produce. We must also defend the pre-eminence that this kind of knowledge must have in regards to the orientation of educational policies and other public policies that will impact the granting of fundamental rights of women and LGBT people, such as the right to life, equality, dignity and safety. And if the knowledge we produce must play such an important role, it is precisely because we are not and cannot simply be 'ideologues'.

Furthermore, it must be noted that the professional authority of anthropology and our association in the public sphere has also been attacked, by other factions. We are being denied recognition of our qualification and specific

authority to produce reports on ethnic groups and their territories. There are attempts to criminalise the anthropological practice, as there are increasing attempts to criminalise those who are subjects of our research studies, as a way to further weaken them. Here and there, the populations with whom we work have been subjected to violence and intolerance by different groups with different interests and relations with the government - or even directly related to the government. It is not surprising that, given our political commitment to such individuals, our own scientific competency is being put under scrutiny.

As one of the longest-standing scientific associations in the country, ABA must take a stand against what is happening. And among us, practitioners of anthropology, political science and sociology, we must strengthen the debate, think of convergence and solidarity. Time is pressing.

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Received February 18th 2018. Accepted March 10th 2018.



