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Bioethics and indigenous worlds: where do we situate ourselves?

The theme discussed by Feitosa et al. is not only highly relevant, but has received little attention in the scientific literature.

Undoubtedly, one reason is the concern by anthropologists to avoid controversial aspects of the indigenous way of life that can be used to stigmatize indigenous peoples and threaten their right to ethnic difference.

In parallel with this academic silence are periodic movements by conservative religious and political groups attempting to regulate native behaviors which they consider offensive to non-indigenous world values. Those who issue such value judgments and positions of force tend to be exuberant in their manifestations of repulsion and condemnation, although rarely possessing qualified information on the cultural contexts

that have produced the behaviors they purport to repress.

This trend reappears in lobby groups in the Brazilian National Congress, seeking to pass laws to criminalize traditional indigenous cultures. Images of infanticide were recently shown on the Internet that purportedly provided a moral justification for this movement, but even the proof that such images were fabricated was insufficient to deter the movement. In the accompanying e-text, the line of argument alternates between indigenous people's supposed inability to discern between what is morally right and wrong and the defense of the supremacy of universal human rights over particular rights linked to cultural difference. According to both alternatives, indigenous people should be protected from themselves through the adoption of Western values and customs. The latter provide the yardstick for measuring the paths to civilization, prescribed for or imposed on non-hegemonic cultures by the cross, by the law, or by education.

The authors have done a good job of problematizing the issue, whether through the pertinence of the current political moment or because they raise relevant questions like the tension between generic and universal ethics and the particular ethics of culturally differentiated societies. This problem has permeated the relations between conquerors and the conquered throughout history.

In this sense, the cases they discuss are exemplary. Their analysis of the forced removal of children – potential victims of infanticide – from the Zuruahá village, of the transitional status of Yanomámi newborns, and other situations in the study, lead us to reflect on the relativism of the cultural construction of the human condition, whether in those societies or in our own. Beyond the so-called “traumas of contact”, the directions of life and death through suicide, abortion, or infanticide in the Zuruahá world reveal our own contradictions, grasped by the text's keen insight. If there is apparent consensus among the Zuruahá concerning who merits the human condition and is a member of society, the same appears not to hold among ourselves. While Western society unanimously condemns infanticide, many Westerners support abortion. As the authors demonstrate, these situations are structurally similar but are treated unequally in our world.

Meanwhile, although we are morally outraged at the threat of biological death, no similar trend is observed towards the social death of persons marked by hunger and physical and psychological violence, as occurs for example with “street children”. We may thus be against abortion and

infanticide, but socially indifferent to the dire living conditions faced by young people that have managed to survive an adverse birth. It is as if we valued the concession of life, while relegating daily care for it to a secondary plane. Meanwhile, social death appears to bother indigenous peoples more than the biological death of beings that have still not been socialized. We thus have a symmetrical opposition between worldviews expressed in these value judgments.

This raises another relevant issue for the discussion. The challenge of analyzing and describing the *Other* (the different and the exotic) repeatedly tempts us to compare the Other with our own self-image. This apparently obvious approach entails a high risk of hasty generalization, given the tendency to ignore the infinite variety of indigenous worlds, as well as the internal differences in our own society. The theoretical and practical risks are magnified by the scarcity of empirical data that would allow analyzing the theme with the necessary rigor, whether to construct a consistent panel on the ethical foundations of indigenous societies or to map the variations in ethical norms and values circulating among our own non-indigenous society.

Given the lack of this background, the temptation to make comparisons tends to make one slip into a uniform treatment of indigenous worlds, transmuting them into caricatures incapable of expressing their intrinsic wealth. Likewise, to ignore the class, gender, and age-group contradictions expressed in our ethical values also proves to be an imprudent option. Many scholars have failed in their attempt to compare such distinct realities, using our own ethos as a mirror to illuminate other worlds. Lévi-Strauss¹ was one of the few successful cases in this undertaking.

Although generalization is an inherent ambition in scientific thinking and positivism, despite its limits it has taught us the value of induction supported by data based on particular realities. Speculative deduction may be acceptable when the qualitative and quantitative accumulation of information proves capable of sustaining universalizing flights. But we lack such accumulated information on the issue of infanticide among indigenous peoples. And we lack the substance for qualified and culturally sensitive decisions on legal and political procedures to deal with it.

In this sense, the authors take a cautious stance by recommending dialogue, listening to singularities, and avoiding hasty generalizations. Although this position is sensible, its argumentative basis is weak, not because of its internal coherency, but because of the philosophical foundations sustaining bioethics.

The universalizing pretention of philosophy is conditioned by its production, namely by the Western cogito². Few philosophers have taken interest in the thought systems of non-Western cultures, thereby limiting their ability to grasp the human condition as a synthesis of the singular and the universal.

Ethics also appear in a similar condition. When we speak of ethics, to which ethic are we referring? An ethic capable of encompassing the multidimensionality of human values or that instituted by hegemonic cultural production in given historical moments? In addition, as the authors have endeavored to demonstrate, the historical change of ethical principles is inherent to their very existence. In practical terms, this translates as the coexistence of old and current values in subjects' daily lives, often involving a mutual contradiction of simultaneously prevailing ethical principles in social life. In this case, what would define the ethical model that should prevail?

The definition of a universal ethical imperative cannot be dissociated from the economic and technological power of those that impose their standards for judging reality as parameters that are applicable to all contexts. In the final analysis, the issue is not ethical, but one of power. As Bourdieu³ would say, the issue is the power to *make others see* and to *make others believe* in what is defined as social reality. Note that we do not defend infanticide. We only attempt to problematize the relativism of the ethical conventions behind the attempts to impose what are offered as universal values on groups living in unique conditions of human existence.

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1. Lévi-Strauss C. O pensamento selvagem. São Paulo: Companhia Editora Nacional; 1962.
 2. Sartre JP. O existencialismo é um humanismo. In: Sartre. São Paulo: Editora Abril Cultural; 1978. p. 2-32. (Coleção Os Pensadores, 45).
 3. Bourdieu P. O poder simbólico. Rio de Janeiro: Editora Bertrand Russel; 1989.