

**TRADITIONS OF KNOWLEDGE: NOTES ON THE FOUNDATIONS OF HUMAN COMMUNICATION**

**TRADIÇÕES DE CONHECIMENTO: NOTAS SOBRE OS FUNDAMENTOS DA COMUNICAÇÃO HUMANA**

**TRADICIONES DE CONOCIMIENTO: NOTAS SOBRE LOS FUNDAMENTOS DE LA COMUNICACIÓN HUMANA**



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**ABSTRACT:** This essay is part of studies that have investigated ways of living and of common thoughts produced by inhabitants of rural communities. For the accomplishment of the research, we problematize the criteria of categorization of rural populations, as traditional populations, with the objective of discussing the notion of traditional knowledge and its association with the similar notion of traditional population. Methodologically, we use the theoretical frameworks to confirm a notion of social knowledge that has support in human experience as a means of expressing communication. We conclude that by the difficulty of conceptualize the object of research “traditional knowledge” associated with specific social groups that would be their producers (the so-called traditional populations) cannot be defined theoretically. Thus, we point to an inflection in the notion of tradition focused on the idea of contemporary production of meanings using symbols, that is, as a fundamental system of understanding life for its users.

**KEYWORDS:** Common sense. Tradition. Human communication.

**RESUMO:** *Este ensaio parte de estudos que investigaram modos de vida e pensamentos comuns produzidos por habitantes de comunidades de áreas rurais. Para a reflexão proposta problematiza-se os critérios de categorização das populações rurais enquanto populações tradicionais, objetivando discutir a noção de conhecimento tradicional e sua associação à semelhante noção de população tradicional. Metodologicamente utilizou-se referenciais teóricos a fim de conformar uma noção de conhecimento social que tenha por base a experiência humana enquanto meio expressivo de comunicação. Conclui-se pela dificuldade de conceituar o objeto de investigação “conhecimento tradicional” associado a grupos sociais específicos que seriam seus produtores, as denominadas populações tradicionais. E aponta-se para uma inflexão na noção de tradição voltada à ideia de produção contemporânea de significados por meio de uso de símbolos, isto, como sistema fundamental de compreensão da vida para seus usuários.*

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** *Senso comum. Tradição. Comunicação humana.*

**RESUMEN:** *Este ensaio parte de los estudios que investigaron modos de vida y pensamientos comunes producidos por habitantes de comunidades de áreas rurales. Para la reflexión propuesta se problematiza los criterios de categorización de las poblaciones rurales como poblaciones tradicionales, con el objetivo de discutir la noción de conocimiento tradicional y su asociación a la semejante noción de la población tradicional. Metodologicamente se utilizaron referenciales teóricos a fin de conformar una noción de conocimiento social de base en la experiencia humana como medio expresivo de comunicación. Se concluye por la complejidad conceptual y metodológica de precisar el objeto de investigación “Conocimiento tradicional” asociado a grupos sociales específicos que serían sus productores y por lo tanto, se denominan poblaciones tradicionales. Y se apunta a una inflexión en la noción de tradición volcada a la idea de producción contemporánea de significados por medio de uso de símbolos, esto que, como sistema fundamental de comprensión de la vida para seus usuários.*

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** *Sentido común. Tradição. Comunicación humana.*

## Introduction

This discussion about the common experience originated in theoretical studies and anthropological, sociological and educational research with rural communities, particularly in the Brazilian Amazon. In fact, the concern with the theoretical issues that surround the theme occurred after the comparison of conceptual references with field data, which fostered a fruitful circularity, translated into comings and goings between the data produced on the ground and the notions conformed in theories. For the purpose of this text, specifically, the discussion focuses on the notions related to the idea of knowledge, problematizing the way in which they are presented elaborated and the consequent application to investigations on rural populations today.<sup>1</sup>

The focus of this essay is, therefore, the appreciation of the term "traditional knowledge" as it has been exposed in the scope of the social sciences and humanities, in order to problematize its family understanding, endorsing the argumentation in favor of a symbolic analysis in studies on social action.

Today there is nothing more evident to those who notice the traditional populations, or in general the human agglomerations of the rural regions (so named in contrast to the urban centers), than the fact that these people hold a specific knowledge, which becomes the distinctive feature of their way of life – the so-called traditional knowledge. What, beforehand, could be characterized as the defense "[...] of the romantic and inept apology of the 'practical knowledge' of segments of the population – a gross bias that is permeating certain formulations that have free course among social workers (and not only)" (NETTO; CARVALHO, 2012, p. 72, our translation).

However, the following arguments are far from adopting a Manichean perspective in relation to traditional and modern terms, or traditional and scientific, or another possible contrast. The intention is not to replace, or abandon, any notion by the simple fact of leaving on the sidelines, since this type of procedure does not contribute to the presentation of solid arguments around the object of any investigation. Rather, the objective is to demonstrate its inadequacy or its adequacy in other terms for the analysis of everyday life.

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Consideration, in this sense, was also made by Spencer when dealing with the concept of society (SPENCER apud INGOLD, 1996, p. 66). Wolf's observation that it is not enough to invent or import new words, the periodic review of our stock of ideas "must be a critical evaluation of the way we formulate and answer questions and the limitations we can bring to this task" (WOLF apud FELDMAN-BIANCO; RIBEIRO, 2003, p. 308, our translation).

### "Theoretical knowledge" and "practical knowledge"

For the next purpose, an epistemological discussion about knowledge is undertaken, which rests on a broader problem that over time has been occupied by several scholars, such as philosophers, sociologists, anthropologists, psychologists and, recently, biologists. It is about man's relationship with the world, or precisely the place that things occupy in a double relationship: of their own with the values of a given cultural order and, at the same time, mediating the intersubjective relations between people, even in another way, between humans and between humans and non-humans.<sup>2</sup>

The phenomenon of human knowledge expressed, in the scope of the social and human sciences, by terms, among others, as 'humanization of nature' or 'process of symbolization of objective reality' has been exposed in different approaches, which commonly translate into the understanding that there is an order of transformation in which a fact is postulated, which originates from a thing itself and transcends it, producing one performed at another level, differentiated from the first in degree and quality.<sup>3</sup>

This explanatory exercise uses dichotomous terms to classify the supposed relationship between the human and the inhuman, despite the terminological variation found in expressions such as those that stand out below: nature versus culture; pragmatic thinking versus reflective thinking; practical rationality versus theoretical rationality; wild thinking versus conceptual thinking; concrete science *versus* science of intrinsic properties; primitive utilitarian thinking versus logical thinking; common sense thinking *versus* scientific knowledge.

This way of approaching the problem of human knowledge or the constitution of a specifically human world, based on virtually different groups, is an affect—for example, in the

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<sup>2</sup> In the fields of Biological Anthropology and Biology consult **The cognitive animal**: empirical and theoretical perspective on animal cognition (2002) and the peculiar theses of Maturana (2001), respectively.

<sup>3</sup> The Enlightenment concept of thing-in-itself aims to circumscribe the limits of human knowledge in what would result from sensitive intuition or pure intellect. In turn, contemporary philosophy understands that knowledge is demarcated by the scope of the methods that preside over its validity; "therefore, it no longer needs the Enlightenment 'C.-in-itself' to impose moderation on man's cognitive pretensions" (cf. ABBAGNANO, 2000, p. 153 - entry: *Coisa-em si.*).

classical phase of anthropology, in addition to the current ones—to the set of approaches to other themes, as Viveiro de Castro records in his critique linked to the notion of society:

The most productive scheme in Western thought, however, was the dichotomous one [in contrast to the tripartition], which lends itself best to strong discontinuities. Translating the conceptual polarity between *universities* and *societas* in terms of a real opposition, the typological dichotomies highlight varied aspects of an ultimately reducible contrast to 'We' versus the 'Others', constituting the core of theories of the Great Divider that singularize the modern West in relation to other human societies. Among the most famous dichotomies — all containing some reference to primitive/civilized or traditional/modern pairings — we can enumerate: kinship/territory (Morgan); status/contract (Mauss); mechanical/organic solidarity (Durkheim); community/society (Tonnies); simple/complex societies (Spencer); gift/merchandise or gift/contract (Mauss); traditional/rational (Weber); holism/individualism (Dumont); cold/hot history, wild/domesticated thought (Lévi-Strauss) (VIVEIROS DE CASTRO, 2002, p. 307, our translation).<sup>4</sup>

It is perceived that the epistemological legacy is predominantly dichotomous, which, in turn, influences the way of approaching and constructing in qualitative ways these cognitive systems, as models of knowledge of reality.

Taking specifically the primitive/civilized pair, the work of Durkheim and Mauss (apud MAUSS, 2001, p. 450-451), for example, promote considerable criticism of that dichotomy, arguing about primitive classifications in non-Western societies, since "these systems, just like those of science, have a speculative purpose. They have as their object, not to facilitate action, but to make understood, to make intelligible the relations existing between beings." Such concern with the modes of knowledge and their operational categories allowed the development of lines of studies that sought to distinguish or approximate strange forms of thought to Western thought. In the wake of this undertaking, Burke (2003, p. 78, our translation) records that:

[...] From Durkheim onwards anthropologists developed a tradition of taking other people's categories or classifications seriously by investigating their social contexts. The tradition included classical studies such as Marcel Granet's *Chinese Thought* (1934) and Claude Lévi-Strauss's *The Wild Thought* (1962). Granet, for example, presented the Chinese categories of *yin* and *yang* as examples of concrete or pre-logical thinking. Lévi-Strauss rejected the idea of the pre-logical, but he also highlighted the concrete categories of the so-called primitive peoples, such as the American Indians, who make a distinction analogous to our contrast between "nature" and "culture" with the categories of "raw" and "stew."

<sup>4</sup> In addition to other dichotomies such as "[...] The pre-technological vs. technological of Gell (1992); or pre-literate/literate of Goody (1997); [...] and Marx's pre-capitalist/capitalist (1965 [1857-58])" (RAPPORT; OVERING, 2003, p. 337).

In the context of the social sciences, the fight against a certain intellectualist vision in the interpretation of human activity in the world is directed to the assumption that social action is not strictly an act of knowing and, in turn, that same action is not made known by a single type of cognitive procedure. On the first angle, we follow Bourdieu's comment:

The discussions that have developed both among ethnologists (ethnoscience) and among sociologists (ethnomethodology) around classification systems have in common the fact that these instruments of knowledge perform as such functions that they are not of pure knowledge. [...] Practical taxonomies, instruments of knowledge and communication that are the condition of the constitution of meaning and consensus on meaning, do not exert their *structuring* effectiveness unless they themselves are *structured*. This does not mean that they are amenable to a strictly *internal* analysis ("structural", "componential" or other) that, by artificially tearing them off their conditions of production and use, prevents them from understanding their social functions (BOURDIEU, 2009, p. 157, our translation).

Simmel collaborates in the second angle of this discussion, with the same kind of observation of Bourdieu mentioned above, showing the reverse side, as a criticism of a certain mode of thought, that of deductive knowledge. The author points out that

[the] precision of logic will never in itself prove the existence of things; this is a fact, which is admitted as given, but which can never be conceived with the absolute necessity that that aspiration of security demands. It will always be one of the most remarkable events in the history of the spirit how this need for absolute security and certainty— **which does not come from mere interests of knowledge, but from man's total relation to the world**—seeks here to satisfy itself by means of mere knowledge; this profound incongruity takes revenge, so to speak, making blind to error and the emptiness of this logical deduction the force of such a longing (SIMMEL, 1970, p. 53, emphasis added, our translation).

It is noticeable that the opposition established between the modes of knowledge of Western science and the other modes seeks to be sustained in the way in which the distinctions of objects and their empirical characteristics are effectuated. This is an understandable aspect. However, the idea that the existing distinctions between the ways of knowing the world are not supported between a pragmatic empiricism – centered on the functionality of practical use – and, a reflective scheme – that seeks the concept. Despite this, Sahlins' proposition is enlightening:

The big difference between this kind of sensory epistemology and the objective realism imagined by Western science [...] is that the former, the so-called *folk* taxonomy, is completely embedded in and mediated by the local cultural order, while the latter pretends to be determined by things themselves and by themselves. [...] In short, creatures are enclosed in a total cosmology

from which it is possible to abstract it as things-in-themselves only at the expense of their social identities (Ellen, 1986: 101). The empiricism of the *pensée sauvage* consists more precisely in the discrimination of creatures and traits of nature according to the human values of their objective characteristics (cf. Feld, 1982) (SAHLINS, 2001, p. 180, our translation).

As Cassirer (2011) notes in the process of conceptual formation of the fields of philosophy as in that of modern science, these areas of knowledge have dispensed treatment somewhat similar to the worldview of "common experience", translated, to the respective epochs, by language and myth. Since "philosophical knowledge must first free itself from the pressure of language and myth; it needs, so to speak, to eliminate these witnesses of human poverty before it can rise to the pure ether of thought" (CASSIRER, 2011, p. 35, our translation). For the author the act exposed by this separation marks the occasion of the emergence of philosophy, as well as "the starting point of empirical investigation and the mathematical determination of nature. [...] And just as scientific knowledge of nature wages a battle with mythical concepts, so it does in relation to linguistic concepts" (CASSIRER, 2011, p. 35-36, our translation).

The attempt to overcome these dichotomies is carried out in the efforts of authors who excelled in the study of symbolism and the effects of culture on practical life. According to the theorists of this line of thought, the symbolic perspective contributes to the overcoming of dichotomous interpretations, as Langer (1951) records when he says that in the notion of symbolization – mystical, practical, or mathematical, etc. – lies the new conception of "mentality", which illuminates questions of life and consciousness, instead of obscuring them, as traditional "scientific methods" did.

To paraphrase the popular saying that "the most important things in life are not things", let us also say that in the realm of the science of culture, of the human universe, one thing is never a thing: it will always be a good or evil spirit; a wind of omen; an unspoiled nature; a gift; a nod of hope; a possibility of continuing existence through a new being; a relative or a stranger; a new or old body, or even not even that, and so on. It is, in short, a type of cognition – in a *broad* sense – that addresses abstractions, idealizations, generalizations and formalizations of different orders, which typify experiences in order to travel the paths of the world.

In fact, no action that is too incomprehensible to contemporaries of the same group can fit into the sociological description, since the object that the scientist interprets is social action, a significant action, at the first level, for the subject himself, in the context (WAGNER, 2010) produced by him from symbolic systems.

Moreover, it is unlikely that the manifestations of psychic life (perceptions, thoughts, feelings, acts of will, etc.) will be unified in all individuals. However, "the similarity of individuals is the condition for giving a 'community' (*Gemeinsamkeit*) of its vital content" (DILTHEY, 1949, p. 57, our translation). Undoubtedly, a cultural system is a community of meaning and not a community of undoubted moral rules, much less is it a group of people, even if it is only through these (people acting on moral rules) that one can apprehend to that (or those systems of signification).

This same understanding, concerning the conceptual critique of the rigidity of social institutions, had been exposed by Mary Douglas in dealing with the ideas of purity and danger, which seems to be able to be extended to sets of ideas that are within the range of action of other cultural systems. Douglas said:

The native of any culture, of course, considers himself a passive receiver of his ideas of power and danger in the universe, discounting any minor modifications to which he himself might have contributed. [...] The anthropologist falls into the same mistake if he thinks of a culture that is studying as a standard of values established long ago (DOUGLAS, 2012, p. 16, our translation).

It is noted that it is in the process of construction of significant structures within anthropological times and places that the subject evaluates the responses obtained by his behavior. That is, within the values of their social group, which modify cultural patterns through new meanings incorporated historically, the result of actions attributing social and symbolic meanings, emerging from the interactions of individuals.

Finally, it is important to pay attention to the strategic use that the actors make of the interpretation and use of socially legitimized knowledge at the level of ideas – a *script* that they did not write, but that they will have to represent in some way in their daily life; a fact that reinforces the following assertion of Marcel Mauss (2003, p. 371, our translation): "It is evident, especially for us, that there has never been a human being who has not had the sense, not only of his body, but also of his spiritual and bodily individuality at the same time."

### **Structures of meanings of communication by symbols**

From the theoretical advances provided by investigations on social and historical realities such as those mentioned above, it becomes possible to extract some implications in order to corroborate the debate regarding the criticism of the term traditional knowledge so that



they can be useful to the study of daily life and, within it, of labor, educational actions, political, religious etc.

Pires' recommendation is lucid about the construction of the research object when he argues that this social pre-construction of the object can constitute a kind of epistemological obstacle before our way of "apprehending it scientifically, because it guides our way of seeing and conceiving it. In short, the appearance that society assumes, especially when it is represented by institutional practices, must be questioned by the analyst" (PIRES apud POUPART, 2012, p. 59, our translation).

Therefore, no term is forbidden to the social scientist as long as it is clear that the object to which it is attached, in many cases, is cut out or constructed by the social institutions themselves, giving it the appropriate treatment, as the author above exemplifies regarding the study of crime and, here, exemplifies with the notion of traditional knowledge.

One aspect to be noted is that the dichotomy between tradition and modernity has crystallized beyond an era as a way of being in the world at any time and place; so that this process substantiated modernity in what it refers to tradition as being the past or as a "time came" stagnant within the present.

In the context of this contrast when one thinks of a traditional knowledge, one accesses to the mind the possibility of describing or enumerating, for a given population, a finite set of knowledge and techniques, the paradigm of the meanings of words in the dictionary, which would be the stock of knowledge updated in everyday practices. On the other hand, when talking about modern knowledge, its creative character is highlighted: that of inventions and discoveries, especially of the man of science.

Regarding this refers initially to the fact that there can be no system of knowledge – a set of ideas and procedures legitimized by common thought – that is not traditional, that is not in use (tradition) by a set of people in a certain place and for a certain time; since, there can be no common knowledge that is not traditional and not in operation. So that instead of the term tradition, as observed in every predicative order in which it is invoked as a subject or as an object (cultural tradition; traditional culture), it will be more appropriate to employ the notion of culture as a system of meanings (GEERTZ, 1989).

Let us see, in general lines, the conventional understanding of what is "tradition" and its derivative, the "traditional knowledge" and then carry out the application of the term tradition only in the sense of dominant pattern, with the interest of eliminating misunderstandings and of producing and communicating some adequate knowledge, taking into account that human

behavior operates in the domain of cultural rules, which is ultimately guided by predominant patterns of thought (BOAS, 2010).

At this point, in fact, the recommendations drawn from Foucault's enterprise are appropriate, when he makes a history of knowledge on how to deal with theoretical problems:

There is, in the first place, a negative work to be done: to free oneself from a whole game of notions that diversify, each in its own way, the theme of continuity. They undoubtedly do not have a fairly rigorous conceptual framework; but its function is precise. Such is the notion of tradition: it aims to give a singular temporal importance to a set of phenomena, at once successive and identical (or, at least, analogous); it allows us to rethink the dispersion of history in the form of this set; authorizes reducing the difference characteristic of any beginning in order to retreat, without interruption, the indefinite attribution of origin; thanks to it, novelties can be isolated on a fund of permanence, and its merit transferred to originality, genius, the decision proper to individuals [...] (FOUCAULT, 2008, p. 23-24, our translation).

The nascent social sciences of the eighteenth century did not pass unscathed to the set of perceptions about social change throughout history. In this field, non-European societies were irretrievably distinguished from their European contemporaries, both on the level of ideals (conceived as archaic) and on the level of history, which, by a "scientific magic", were called static, as if they stagnated in time. A fact that not only differentiated the peoples between *us* (modern Westerners) and *them* (not archaic Westerners), but between the Westerners themselves, the modern (city-dwellers) and the so-called non-modern (from rural areas).

As social anthropology sought to understand how man came to become what he is or more specifically how "we" Westerners came to become what we are, it did not postpone the idea that its theorists saw in populations that had different ways of life than their own, an age prior to the evolution of the human mind and society. The logic of the hypotheses was quite simple and effective: the archaic societies, which operated ideas and forms of social organization in disuse at the present time in which intellectuals lived, would recall the long stages through which humanity would have passed towards civilization.<sup>5</sup>

The modern age itself, however, fell victim to the assumption that the ongoing social and intellectual change was irreversible toward human progress. In turn, if change were to be continuous, even modern ideas would change, since the contemporaries of modernity itself no longer identified with previous generations, claiming for themselves the title of postmodern beings.

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<sup>5</sup> One of the exponents of the so-called evolutionary theories in Anthropology is Lewis Henry Morgan who exposes in the work **Ancient Society** (CASTRO, 2005) the theory of ethnic periods, which would be ascending stages (savagery, barbarism and civilization) through which peoples passed (or would pass) in their natural development.

Despite the chronological overcoming of the Modern Age, which ushered in the Contemporary Age, his ideals resonated until the next age. Contemporary discourse has not been able to create something so powerfully dichotomous and contrasting, thus a safe haven, compared to what is evaluated between the ancient and the modern. The very concepts that creep into contemporaneity do so alluding to the modern: the postmodern discourse.

Thus, postmodernism emerged as an attitude, as an indeterminate form without determined content, simply moving away from what would be modern and even recombining what existed modern in another perspective. Gradually, collage became a hallmark of postmodernity. In fact, "the postmodern movement initiated in the late 1970s, beginning of the 1980s, does not represent anything innovative, unlike the 'scientific revolution' initiated during the Renaissance" (BATALHA, 1998, p. 332, our translation).

Being postmodern led to an ingenious operation. First it would be necessary to separate the ancient from the modern and then recombine the modern elements in any direction, except in the sense that it was identified with the ancient, with this we have the perennial character of the ancient and modern hierarchical opposites.

Despite the advances in anthropological knowledge, which certainly refuted these ethnocentric ideas, the differentiated view of the way of life of populations to a greater or lesser degree persisted: those who reproduced their values exclusively through orality (the traditional ones) and those who perpetuated their ideals through writing (the modern ones). This separation was not without problems. When social scientists began to study their own societies, this dichotomy was simply reproduced: rural societies would live in tradition (oral) and urban societies in modernity (writing).

More than a century has passed since the first scientific writings of the sciences of man and society, but the inadequacies of the use of the word tradition and modernity continue to divert us from more solid ways of understanding social life. Throughout the twentieth century the traditional and modern poles went through a period of equivalence. The influences of the political debate proposed by multiculturalism have certainly been felt regarding the identification of cultural differences, namely intranational ones, postulating that all cultures are epistemologically and anthropologically equivalent.

In the final decades of the last century and in the beginning of this century, the traditional-modern pair reached its complete inversion, that is, the valorization of the traditional – understood as being linked to basic values of coexistence (solidarity, love of neighbor,

kinship) and, above all, a self-sustaining way of life as opposed to the modern one – seen as individualistic, consumerist, domineering and predatory of nature.

Again, another political discourse is at the basis of this modification, it is the ecologism (DIEGUES, 2008) that claims that in the lifestyle of the "traditional" populations prevails the safe model for the preservation of nature and maintenance of life on the Planet. It is interesting to show that, as a kind of "return to the origins", it is a trend that emerged during the "middle of the last century [XIX] in the writings of the representatives of the Indianist school of our literature and reaches its apogee in the novels of José de Alencar, in which our cultural roots are valued: the Indian, rural life, etc." (OLIVEN, 1999, p. 411, our translation).

However, it is perceived that the main values put in check, parallel to the conservationist and preservationist debate, is the great value derived and not realized from modern science: the progress of civilization through scientific knowledge. In this aspect of discourse, primitivism is resorted to as another possibility of progress (KUPPER, 1988).

There seems to be no solution to the problem of understanding whether "traditional knowledge" is good or bad except to place it at a fork whose paths intersect soon after, as illustrated by the text by Darcy Ribeiro (1995) regarding the wisdom of the caboclos of the Amazon:

The basic characteristic of this variant [sociocultural of national society] is the primitivism of its adaptive technology, essentially indigenous, conserved and transmitted, through centuries, without substantial changes. And, the inadequacy of this mode of action on nature to provide satisfactory living conditions and a minimum of integration in modern consumer societies [...]

(RIBEIRO, 1995, p. 310, our translation).

Taylor, in turn, distinguishes two ways of understanding the emergence of modernity that have different effects on what makes our contemporary society different from its ancestors, which he called a cultural perspective and an acultural perspective:

In other words, we can think of difference as a difference between civilizations, each with its own culture. Or, alternatively, we can see the change of centuries before the present day as involving something like "development," such as the disappearance of a "traditional" society and the rise of the "modern." And in this perspective, which seems to be the dominant one, things seem quite different <sup>6</sup>(TAYLOR, 2001, p. 1, our translation).

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<sup>6</sup> For Dumont (2000) in modern societies ideology values the individual and neglects or subordinates the social totality (individualism); in the preceding social formations, conversely, the set of common ideas and values values the social totality and neglects or subordinates the human individual (holism). In these terms, the author considers the modern configuration as resulting from the breaking of the value relationship between element and whole.

Following this classification, we could say that in the current debate, around traditional knowledge, the dominant (or acultural) perspective is confused with the cultural perspective producing an even more harmful effect. The change, once seen as a loss of belief, of perennial truths, of negative readings of reality towards the progress of reason (acultural perspective) merges with the cultural perspective, taking the difference between cultures, in order to keep unviolated, the traditional values, now positive, for the betterment of global society.

Mariza Peirano, in turn, recovers this discussion, assessing that evolutionary suggestion implicit in the pair 'simple society *versus* complex society' has its roots in the theory of modernization, developed from the 1950s onwards. "In this conception, to be modern means to be complex, the complexity here referring mainly to the aspects of social organization" (PEIRANO, 1992, p. 114, our translation). In turn, the elimination of traditional elements would lead to complexity, however, for Peirano (1992, p. 115, our translation), "in this case, it is necessary to know what is meant by 'tradition', or by 'traditional'. When these concepts are indistinctly imposed on social groups that have gone through the most varied processes of historical development, their fragility becomes apparent."

In order to answer the very question about what "tradition" is, Peirano endorses the thesis of the ahistoricity of the term, based on Tambiah (1972, p. 55 apud PEIRANO, 1992, p. 115, our translation):

[...] The term is used, especially, in an "ahistorical" sense and denotes some kind of collective heritage that was supposedly transmitted in an unmodified form. Conceiving tradition in this way, two points are forgotten: one that the past was, perhaps, as open and as dynamic to the actors of that time as our epoch seems to ourselves; another, that the norms, rules, and orientations of the past were not necessarily as consistent, unified, and coherent as we tend to imagine.

The following is the author's conclusion:

In short, Tambiah shows that by settling on one of the poles of an analytical dichotomy, one can easily imagine nonexistent degrees of coherence and idealize degrees of social integration greater than those actually found in societies at the opposite pole. Like the individual who idealizes the past as always better than the present, the anthropologist would be likely to fall into the same trap, idealizing "tradition", or even the "simple society" (PEIRANO, 1992, p. 115, our translation).

More flexible propositions suggest, specifically regarding Brazil in relation to the global world, that one seek not modernity itself – that is, the social and cultural reality produced by the awareness of the transience of the new and the current – as it was idealized, but by the

possible forms that it assumes within group life. "My proposal is that the question of modernity in Brazil is better understood when we investigate the way in which the modern and the signs of modernity are incorporated by the popular. In this mediation, it is possible to observe the difficulties of modernity" (MARTINS, 2010, p. 29, our translation).

Oliven's previous elaboration (1998) on modernity concerning the history of the country, points out the centrality of this theme in Brazilian intellectual thought: "The theme of modernity is a constant in Brazil and has occupied our intellectuality in different eras. It is about knowing how we are in relation to the 'advanced world', first Europe, later the United States" (OLIVEN, 1998, p. 409, our translation).

In this exposition on the words' tradition and modernity and their relations, one observation is evident: these words despite transiting in the scientific environment are, for the most part, value judgments, whose meanings are associated with sociopolitical events. For the notion of tradition to have any use in the study of the way of life of populations in different areas, we need to move it away from the ideas presented earlier while disentangling it from its opposite (the word modernity); it means limiting it to the meaning of a pattern of meanings that is reproduced through everyday language.

Thus, it is argued that "tradition" is better interpreted as a dynamic system of symbolic communication than as a fixed set of values transported unchanged between generations of people over time, as if these people were their receptacles rather than their producers. Possibly the only way to stagnate tradition in the past, or rather, at a point in time, may be the extinction of the pattern of communication between its agents, as in the case of dead languages.

## **Conclusion**

The knowledge or constitution of a human world or the process of signification of man in the world differs in the theoretical cuts presented, ranging from an intellectually based action, through an interpretive process to a sociocultural dynamic that demarcates the differentiation of social groups by the emphases with which they attribute value to certain dimensions of life.

In this context, it is maintained that the appreciation of the term "traditional knowledge" enables its criticism and endorses the argument in favor of a symbolic analysis in studies on social behavior and, consequently, on all traces of action that allow to record the construction of man's humanity. In fact, when it comes to the action and understanding of the world, it is

perceived that the recognition of the things that constitute the human universe is not pure knowledge, although we can identify a cognitive dimension in experience.

The life of the investigated groups is constituted as a social and symbolic construction, being made and remade according to the temporal and local circumstances that denote possibilities of realization of their humanity, since confronted with the characteristics of the environment with the technical and economic conditions hitherto achieved, the spirit does not remain passive. In this sense, beyond the strict conception of a *homo technicus*, social actions are postulated as significant systemic relations, that is, as ways of humanly carrying out the cultural project in the set of cultural dimensions of life.

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