

## PRESENTATION

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**F**ocused on the topic of relativism in the Social Sciences, issue 120 of *Relaciones* examines a particularly important problem in the specific areas of epistemology that our journal deals with: those of the Social Sciences and Humanities. More precisely, it takes on questions that have long seemed to have the consistency of quicksand: academic fields that offer no firm handhold and involve many –perhaps too many– issues. Of course, one of those topics is the concept of culture and the multiple facets that this polysemic term presents. Each culture –which early 20<sup>th</sup>-century anthropological linguists assumed to be autarkic– can now be conceived of as one macro semiotic system (a semiosphere, to use Lotman’s term) that administers both the baggage of meaning that human groups live on, and the hierarchization of its texts or communication processes. Within such systems, each human group organizes the diverse aspects of its life through a highly variable and hierarchical network of languages, with their respective texts that, in turn, function in and for a wide range of dynamic semiospheres that act as hermeneutical circumscriptions with their respective horizons of hope and their axiological prejudices.

But it is not only the vast, varied and polysemic concept of culture that is on the epistemological horizon of relativism that constitutes the focal point of this issue. Also involved are the entities we are accustomed to calling “science”, “scientific method”, “truth”, “objective”, and “reality”, that still resonate with the echoes of discussions that took place in Mexico more than a century ago around such positions as the different positivisms that, despite having been unmasked and exposed so frequently, continue just as prepotent as ever in certain redoubts. This is the pure milieu of discourse, of the use of language from the perspective of the

speaker under the assumption that passing anything through the codes of language means transforming it into a linguistic event, a subjective composition, regardless of the type of discourse in question. Today we know, in effect, that whatever their nature may be, discourses do not reflect 'reality' but, rather, only construct, maintain and reinforce certain interpretations of that 'reality', representations of society, its social practices, social actors, and the relations that are established among them.<sup>1</sup>

This draws attention to a truth that Pero Grullo recognized a long time ago: language plays a powerful role that historically conditions our perception and knowledge of all things, because, as the Ludwig Wittgenstein of *Tractatus* stated, the harmony between thought and reality is based upon the grammar of language. And it is from this perspective that we open the world, but only that of one epoch. Moreover, as is well known, each era and place has its own code of knowledge from which its language conducts its reconstruction of its world; something akin to an archive of which the speakers of that time and place avail themselves in order to relate to the "objects" that make up their "reality". However, those "objects" and that "reality", of which the sciences speak, are "objects" formed in discourse, a form of speech that always defends its own interests.

The *Thematic Section* opens with Philippe Schaffhauser's article entitled "Reflections on a Paradox: The Ethnocentric Relativism of Pragmatism", in which he argues that the problem of the relationship between relativism and ethnocentrism is such a recurring one in anthropological thought that it has become a *cul-de-sac*, having generated a discussion that is now bogged down in an unbridled normativity that even establishes how we ought to study and respect cultural diversity. The essay approaches this relationship from a pragmatic perspective that, although it does allow us to clarify certain confusing aspects of the problem, also introduces an epistemological and normative bias that the author calls "pluralist critical centrism". The article thus initiates a discussion with a wide range of authors, including John Dewey, Clifford Geertz, Richard Rorty, Marvin Harris, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Hans Joas, Donald Davidson and Ludwig Wittgenstein. Schaffhauser, therefore, proposes an exploration of

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<sup>1</sup> Luisa Martín Rojo, "El orden social de los discursos", in *Discurso. Teoría y análisis*, Nueva Época, otoño 1996-primavera 1997, Mexico, UNAM, pp. 1-37.

routes that might allow for an escape from two longstanding alternatives: everything is relative, or science is only possible in the universal.

The article begins with a reflection on ethnocentrism, which the author understands as a structural problem in the work of the Social Sciences where he perceives a clear wink in the direction of the sociology of Pierre Bourdieu, which proposes discovering the hidden mechanisms of domination that remain shrouded behind social structures. For this reason the essay explores the –budding– relations between the Social Sciences (especially sociology and anthropology) and the pragmatist tradition propelled in the United States by authors as diverse as they are, up to a point, convergent. Schaffhauser then goes on to introduce pragmatist thought into a dialogue with certain anthropological voices, reaching the conclusion that of the relationships he explores among relativism, ethnocentrism and pragmatism, the pragmatist paradox is rooted in its philosophical orientation as pluralist critical centrism. He concludes that, like perspectivism, pragmatic pluralism is not only efficient in terms of accounting for cultural diversity but, above all, morally acceptable. Pragmatism, therefore, as it is used by authors like Dewey or Mead (Joas, 1997), has no pretension of resolving the problem of relativism *vis-a-vis* universalism and its “ethnocentered” variants and *vice versa*, but only aspires to change our viewpoint and our way of approaching this problem in order to, first, demonstrate the entanglement in which we are currently ensconced, and then signal where we should search for a way out.

In the second article, “Ways of Speaking, Styles of Reasoning. On Some Varieties of Arrogant Reason”, Rodrigo Díaz Cruz takes as his starting point the idea that there is at least one point at which the absolutist and relativist positions come together, despite their wide differences: both are overwhelmed by the certainties that animate them. While absolutism posits its certainties on a global scale, considering them to be valid for all times and all places, relativism applies its truths to terrains, lifestyles and cultures that are specific, local and precisely delimited. While one demands that the cognitive subject exile her/himself from all culture and history –though not necessarily from all language– in order to be transformed into “the eye of God”, the other’s certainties inevitably imprison subjects in their ways of life, languages and cultures, pieces of the world from which escape is impossible.

Díaz Cruz concludes that it behooves us to recognize that the production of knowledge, and its practical-moral implications, is an emphatically open process, one that is fragile and uncertain, one with alternative positions that must be discussed, pondered and evaluated, case by case, though this always presupposes venturing into rough terrains on journeys that are circumscribed and never-ending. This also entails acceptance of the fact that disagreements constitute a central part of our lives. For this author, the production of anthropological knowledge demands that we be particularly careful when dealing with the concept of culture, because it has given rise to an intolerant image of others—one of redemption—and, indeed, acts impregnated by an arrogant reason that “never ceases to desire more of itself and nothing of the other”, a “form of the sectarian spirit”. This type of reason finds its principal vocation in establishing rigid, clearly defined frontiers between ourselves and others. It is a reason that, according to each case, and in an inversely proportional relationship, makes some opaque while turning others transparent. It tends towards making cultures into totalities; or, as in the case of the homily and the encyclical, obliging everyone, after a transformation, to form part of one unique totality that has no room for dissent.

In the third contribution to this section, “‘This Isn’t Theater!... And Indigenous Peoples Aren’t Like This’: Notes on Relativism in the Interpretation of the Performing Arts”, Elizabeth Araiza Hernández uses indigenous theater to explore the reasons why relativism has not attained absolute power, despite its status as the dominant ideology in the modern period. She reviews the arguments that have served to undermine the weight of relativism’s influence in interpretations of theater and art. Rather than offering conclusive answers, her article seeks to stimulate reflection by examining several relevant passages from the history of contemporary indigenous theater, the categories that both scholars and the general public have used to categorize it, and the criteria through which it has been evaluated. The essay evokes significant experiences of universal theater that illustrate how the definition or appraisal of that particular art form is intrinsic to the concept of the Other.

Centering her attention on indigenous theater in Mexico, the author considers it a case that may illustrate quite well the debate between universalism and relativism, including all of their uncertainties and contra-

dictions. Clearly, one tendency within that theatrical tradition, in its contemporary phase, was fostered by government-sponsored educational and cultural programs and, more recently, by NGOs inspired by the ideas of progress, both historical-material and intellectual, moral and aesthetic, all of whom shared the primary objective of integrating indigenous peoples into the nation. The article concludes that relativist arguments on both the irreducible character of human artistic creations and the special nature of the performing arts among remote peoples possess a high power of personalization. And it is for these reasons that the misunderstanding of universalism has emerged, as the arguments in its favor often seem to suggest that the universal is a knowledge that has already been attained by placing all particular expressions in perspective, though this is impossible. Nonetheless, we must keep in mind that universal is the horizon of harmony between two particulars.

On this occasion, *Relaciones* closes its *Thematic Section* with Godfrey Guillaumin's article "Epistemological Relativism Seen through Thomas Kuhn's Theory of Scientific Change", in which the author shows that radical philosophical relativism has been associated with the work of Thomas Kuhn; specifically his book, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Guillaumin argues that this association is paradoxical, because Kuhn did not consider himself to be a radical relativist. Thus, the essay has a double objective; first, it proposes an analysis that demonstrates some of the reasons why it is incorrect to classify Kuhn's work as radical relativist; and, second, it shows that Kuhn himself tacitly offered a way out through the idea of scientific reasoning.

The radical relativist conclusion, which holds that one paradigm is just as good as any other, finds difficulty in giving an account of many of the scientific controversies that have arisen throughout the history of science as specialists working in different paradigms have long debated issues among themselves. Indeed, attempts to explain scientific controversies and their resolution using the theory of incommensurate paradigms are neither historically viable nor epistemologically coherent, as we find in all of them communication, comparison and rational discussion in terms, for example, of the evaluation of empirical evidence, or the various methods of proof, despite the fact that each band holds distinct conceptions of the nature of those elements. The essay shows that Kuhn

spent the rest of his life trying to develop an evolutionary image of science, primarily to counter the accusations of radical relativism. Just as Kuhn tenuously foresaw, scientific reasoning is the principal via of interrelations among different paradigms.

*Relaciones* thanks Philippe Schaffhauser and Yanga Villagómez Velázquez for their valuable collaboration in the elaboration of this issue.

The *Documents Section* presents the *Descripción de Chalchihuites* (“Description of Chalchihuites”), the abbreviated, commonly used name for a text whose full title is *Descripción topográfica del Real de Minas del Señor San Pedro de los Chalchihuites* (“Topographical Description of the Mines of Señor San Pedro of Chalchihuites”), with a presentation by Tomás Dimas Arenas. The *Descripción*, written in 1777 by Bartholomé Sáenz de Ontiveros, is unquestionably a discovery of great importance for the history of northern Mexico. Though concise, it gives a firsthand description written by a resident of the area, and not by an emissary of the Crown sent from some other region or even from the Peninsula. This description complements one elaborated by Bishop Alonso de la Mota y Escobar, penned after his visit there in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century. Upon comparing the two, we can see the transformations that Chalchihuites experienced during the colonial period. Sáenz de Ontiveros’ version has often been mentioned by historians, but the complete text had never been published in a historical work until this presentation, in which the orthography has been updated and the text itself meticulously paleographed. The document is accompanied by a map of the town and the lands surrounding that mining center, dated in 1782; the original of which is held in the Historical Archive of the state of Zacatecas

Yanga Villagómez Velázquez and María Rosa Nuño Gutiérrez introduce the *General Section* with the article, “Indigenous Education in Mexico and Canada. Strategies of Social Integration, Ethnocentrism and Indigenous Rights”, in which they examine the place that education occupies among the diverse and varied aspects of the dominant culture. According to Villagómez and Nuño, education for autochthonous peoples has been linked not only to the particularly important issue of the constitution of nation-states, but also to the idea of citizenship that each country has implemented as part of its efforts to consolidate its population around a common political, economic and social project. However,

the ethnic-cultural origins of the peoples who currently inhabit the territories colonized by Europeans come from dissimilar horizons, while States, as they strive to make their nations more uniform, have implemented educational plans based on models that vary from assimilation to the rhetorical acceptance of cultural and linguistic differentiation; precisely the focus of this text. The central question can be formulated as an inquiry into how countries as different as Canada –mainly the province of Quebec– and Michoacán, Mexico, confront the cultural challenge of proposing educational models for their indigenous cultures, and into the nature of the problematic associated with such aspects as financing education, the professionalization of teachers and the salience of State-sponsored programs, in a context where, in principle, the objectives pertain to a model of intercultural bilingual education.

The second article in the *General Section* “Pames, Franciscans and Ranchers in Rioverde, Valles and Southern Nuevo Santander, 1600-1800”, by Jose Alfredo Rangel Silva, analyzes the relations among the indigenous Pames, Franciscan missionaries, and ranchers in a frontier territory of New Spain that embraced the highland towns and mining centers of San Luis Potosí and Guadalcazar. There, the Franciscans converted the Pames people into a labor force for the nearby ranches and haciendas. In that process, the ranchers and their ranch hands subjected those “neophytes” to all manner of abuse and disdain on their properties that surrounded the Franciscan missions. Relations between ranchers and Indians were marked by violence, with the Franciscans acting as intermediaries.

This essay shows how eastern San Luis, a frontier area, had slowly changed from 1617 to 1748, as the “spiritual” conquest and acculturation traversed periods of advance, regression and stagnation. There, the colonizing project in Nuevo Santander marked a rupture in the history of the Pames who, unlike other Indian groups that simply disappeared, succeeded in surviving through a century and a half of violent invasions in New Spain without losing their spaces of autonomy and escape. In the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the territorial pressures that weighed upon the missions and Indian towns reached their maximum intensity in both of those *custodias* and reduced to a minimum the escape routes that had previously allowed the Indians to flee when the hardships and

harassment they experienced became unbearable. However, the Pames managed to survive despite the violence to which they were subjected in their new circumstances by adapting and, moreover, succeeded in maintaining their ethnic identities, despite being concentrated (*reducidos*) on the missions. The article shows that violence played a significant role in the formation and functioning of that frontier; indeed, that it was the usual way of establishing properties that were later recognized by royal edicts (*mercedes*). Even among the ranchers themselves, and their shepherds and ranch hands, violence was one of the aspects that most clearly defined labor relations on those economic units. Physical violence was directed primarily against the Pames, where brutal punishments, the humiliation of individuals and families, and the fetters put on those who were to be removed from the missions, were used selectively, because it turned out that a few examples sufficed to establish a politics of fear among those subaltern subjects, inequality as the natural order of things (in social and ethnic matters), and the superiority of the dominant groups. It may be that this accounts for the absence of large-scale rebellions or tumults in the area of study during the colonial period. Finally, it can be said that violence resulted not only from the colonization of that frontier but, in reality, played an integral role in its realization and culmination.

This issue closes with an article by B. Georgina Flores Mercado entitled, “We Are Distorting Our Traditional Sound”. The Past and Present of Traditional Music and Woodwind Ensembles in Tingambato, Michoacán”, which presents the results of ethnographic research on collective memory, cultural identity, and traditional music among members of woodwind ensembles in the Meseta Purépecha. Her observations are based primarily on fieldwork carried out in the town of Tingambato, where she interviewed not only musicians but also music teachers and students, as well as radio announcers from other towns in the Meseta. From the perspective of cultural psychology, this article suggests that by performing and practicing traditional music, people create narratives related to cultural and local identity and the past and present of Purépecha towns.

Traducción de Paul C. Kersey Johnson