

Society with the State: Indigenous politics, voting and elections



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ABSTRACT

Born from the discussions held in the Working Group “Indigenous Policies in Non-Indigenous Politics” at the 31st Brazilian Meeting of Anthropology in 2018, and supported by a project developed at the Laboratory of Research in Ethnicity, Culture, and Development (Laced) at the National Museum, the book *Antropologia da Política Indígena* [Anthropology of Indigenous Politics] (Verdum & De Paula, 2020), with just over 500 pages, brings together articles by Brazilian and

Latin American researchers on the participation of indigenous peoples from Brazil, Colombia, Peru, Argentina, Mexico, and Ecuador in municipal-level electoral processes. Predominantly ethnographic in nature, most of the chapters that make up the work explore the wide range of situations faced by indigenous people in their attempts to engage with non-indigenous political structures of representation, listing the main obstacles and difficulties that must be overcome by this form of indigenous politics. The book reveals the importance of a multidisciplinary perspective in the study of the phenomenon and the dialogue with an emerging anthropology focused on the study of voting, elections, and political parties.

Keywords: Indigenous protagonism, Indigenous candidacies, Elections, Electoral process, Political anthropology.

1 INTRODUCTION

Indigenous political action towards the State and other institutions has been under the scrutiny of Brazilian and Latin American anthropology for at least five decades. This attention, in the initial phases, was focused on the response of these populations to their respective countries' official indigenist policies, as well as their reactions to the economic fronts of expansion encroaching on their territories. Indigenists, backwoods explorers, anthropologists, and organizations advocating for the indigenous cause held prominent positions in these analyses, occasionally sharing the stage with indigenous leaders from various communities. From the 1980s onwards, particularly in Brazil, multiple studies began to shift their focus toward the formation of the indigenous movement, yielding the most notable outcome, the establishment of indigenous organizations configured in a wide array of formats (structured at local, regional, or national levels; representing entire groups or specific segments such as teachers or women; structured for the defense of community rights or the management of specific projects, and so on). The early years of this organized indigenous movement still retained a more than significant space for the “friends of the indigenous cause”, such as the Indigenous Missionary Council, which organized the initial indigenous assemblies in the 1970s, by engaging with leaders of the groups they worked with in the Midwest region of Brazil (Matos, 1997). Following the promulgation of the



1988 Constitution, indigenous protagonism advanced by leaps and bounds, sidelining the allies of the indigenous cause. This indigenous movement, led by native political actors, unveils a novel social framework whose core has shifted from indigenist politics or indigenism driven by allied forces to genuinely indigenous policy (Rufino, 2022).

Indigenous political action in defense of their interests takes on another dimension that, nevertheless, transcends the boundaries of their organizational activities. It begins to scrutinize the republican institutions of non-indigenous people, seeking direct involvement in public policies that impact the destinies and daily lives of their communities. Among the institutional spheres of republican power in Latin American countries, municipal legislative bodies have been the subject of particular attention and investment by these groups, their leaders, and organizations.

The book *Antropologia da Política Indígena* (2020), edited by Ricardo Verdum and Luís Roberto de Paula, brings together researchers from Brazil, Colombia, Peru, Argentina, Mexico, and Ecuador to discuss several cases of this form of indigenous political engagement in municipal electoral processes. It reveals illustrative experiences of a new form of political struggle and supra-group organization. There is a clear predominance of research on the Brazilian context, which occupies the entirety of the first part of the book (with 13 chapters in the first part and 6 in the second, dedicated to the experiences of these other countries). Due to space constraints, we will limit our discussion to only a few of these works, with the hope of highlighting the nature of the book.

Let's begin with the article by Luís Roberto de Paula, one of the editors of the volume, which sets the tone for this particular approach to indigenous participation in electoral processes. In “Indigenous Participation in Municipal Elections in Brazil (1976 to 2016): A Preliminary Quantitative Systematization and Some Research Issues”, De Paula raises the first major question that arises when encountering an anthropological study of electoral processes: what does anthropology have to offer on a topic already extensively explored by political science, beyond the mere fact that it involves the relationship between indigenous peoples and the nation-state? The question is answered through the work of Moacir Palmeira and Márcio Goldman (Palmeira & Goldman, 1996), who, in a seminal piece, suggest removing elections from the core of analysis and instead contemplating the broader intricacies that lie beneath the relationship between voting and political representation. This effort inevitably mobilizes ethnographic practice and reflection on the cultural life of groups that typically escape the gaze of conventional political analysis. De Paula, in discussing the 583 indigenous municipal mandates between 1976 and 2016, suggests that the unique case of indigenous peoples requires a multidisciplinary approach and connections between qualitative and quantitative methodologies.

In a book focused on indigenous presence in municipal electoral processes, it would be incomplete without analyses of the municipality with the largest indigenous presence in the country, São Gabriel da Cachoeira (AM), in the Northwestern Amazon. Two articles are dedicated to the city,



which encompasses 26 distinct ethnic groups and overlaps with seven demarcated Indigenous Lands. The first article, by Aline Fonseca Iubel, titled “Politics In and Of Indigenous Land: Elections in São Gabriel da Cachoeira”, explores the complexity of political action by agents sustained by a framework of significant ethnic diversity in various electoral contests in the 21st century, revealing the upward movement of indigenous involvement in party politics. The second article, authored by indigenous individuals Baniwa, offers an intriguing analysis of indigenous victories in the municipality of São Gabriel (not only in the legislative realm but also in the mayor's office and its departments), and it demonstrates the impact of this political engagement on neighboring municipalities. Indigenous Baniwa individuals, Franklin and Valkíria, themselves are protagonists of a political strategy aimed at reaching the State Legislative Assembly and the National Congress.

I also highlight two chapters from the “Brazilian” section of the book that bring forth relevant conceptual questions regarding indigenous participation in electoral processes. “The Participation of the Tenetehara in the 2018 Elections” by Florbela Almeida Ribeiro, places the issue of political representation at the center of the discussion. It analyzes the behavior of Tenetehara voters from two Indigenous Lands in Maranhão, not only in the context of local disputes but also in light of the candidacy of Sônia Guajajara, another indigenous Maranhense, for the vice presidency of the Republic, in a techno-political setting marked by a strong presence of social media in indigenous communities. “Indigenous Politics and 'White Politics': The Role of the Potiguara in Electoral Processes in the City of Baía Traição (PB)”, by José Glebson Vieira, investigates how the Potiguara create their own cultural categories to think about politics and, through these categories, produce a classification of relationships that distinguishes between “white politics”, materialized in party politics, and “indigenous politics”, expressed in indigenous policy, in the local context.

Among the chapters that address indigenous participation in electoral processes outside of Brazil, I will focus on two of them. Oscar Espinosa, in “Indigenous Electoral Participation in the Peruvian Amazon”, presents a rather surprising case study: despite their socio-cultural, economic, and demographic significance, the indigenous population of Peru only began to engage in electoral politics as voters and candidates in the early 1980s. The chapter provides essential information about the various elections held from then until 2018, including the numerous obstacles to indigenous participation in the electoral process, the creation of the Indigenous Movement of the Peruvian Amazon, and the involvement of indigenous candidates in non-indigenous political parties. In “Local Government in Indigenous Territory: Conflicts and Disputed Territorialities in the Case of Pastaza, Central Amazonia, Ecuador”, Pablo Ortiz-T presents a scenario familiar to those who study the implementation of economic development projects affecting indigenous populations in Brazil. This scenario is marked by a development-oriented, production-oriented, and ethnocentric economic perspective. The author discusses the complex relationship of indigenous communities with issues of



territorial governance, planning, public management, and conflicts stemming from this relationship. Special attention is given to the political action of the Kichwa people against the alliance between the Ecuadorian state and the oil extraction industry. In their struggle to assert their territorial planning model, indigenous communities advocate for a restructuring of the local political system and the right to a form of self-management integrated with the administration of the national state.

The diversity of the research collected in this book reveals the increasing importance of the topic for those observing the transformations of indigenous leadership and the pressure that the actions of these communities exert on indigenous policies and the republican institutions responsible for our system of representation. As De Paula emphasizes, strengthening this research agenda is urgent and is still in its early stages. Topics such as the challenging native appropriation of our electoral system or the resistance of political parties in dealing with indigenous diversity deserve greater attention from anthropologists. In a social context marked by significant political resistance from indigenous peoples in the face of the attacks and anti-indigenous policies characteristic of the Bolsonaro government, the publication of this book appropriately underscores the importance of consolidating and intensifying this “new” avenue of action for indigenous leaders and organizations. Even though this government has come to an end, surpassed by political forces that are minimally supportive or sensitive to the indigenous cause, this work teaches us that the challenges faced by indigenous leadership in electoral processes or in the execution of parliamentary mandates are among the last frontiers in the struggle for indigenous rights. An analysis of this by investigations that are still in their early stages is crucial for us to understand the complexity and diversity of indigenous politics in the present.



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