

Tzvetan Todorov and Anthropology

Abstract

The article is dedicated to Tzvetan Todorov's book "The Conquest of America: The Question of the Other" and its reception by anthropologists. In this regard, an episode from the history of anthropology is traced in more detail, in which Todorov is criticized, though he does not respond to this criticism: the debate between Gananath Obeyesekere and Marshall Sahlins.

Keywords

The Conquest of America, the question of the Other, anthropology of the first contact, dialogue, ethnology

"What profession should I put on my business card?
Historian, anthropologist, philosopher?
I prefer not to choose." (Todorov 2019, 184)

The impetus for writing this text stems from a surprise: after researching the academic literature, I found that the question of Tzvetan Todorov's influence on anthropology has never been raised. It is difficult to say whether this is due to negligence, jealousy, underestimation and silence, or simply that the time for the question has not arrived. I intend to partially fill this gap by limiting the question mainly to one of his books – "The Conquest of America: The Question of the Other" – and its reading in anthropological circles. Here, the distance in time is particularly useful. It allows me to undertake a calm reconstruction of the text and a relatively neutral review of the reactions to it.

Positioning myself in relation to the character

Before that, however, following the norm of self-reflection established in our discipline, I will begin by positioning myself in relation to the time and the character of this essay. When I met Tzvetan

Todorov in Paris in the early nineties, I was entering anthropology in the narrow sense of the word, from which he had already seemed to have distanced himself. At that time, he was interested in, discussed, and wrote about the situation of man in the camps (Todorov 1991) or the individual in Dutch painting (Todorov 1991) in the light of major questions of Western thought: “What does the generally accepted fact that man is a social being really mean” (Todorov 1995). Even when he spoke of general anthropology, he did so not through the prism of the classics of the craft, but through the French intellectual tradition, which he had found did not generally accept the “social being” as necessarily inherent in man. Instead, for Montaigne, La Bruyere and Pascal it is loneliness, for Machiavelli and Hobbes it is egoism, for La Rochefoucauld and Kant it is the same, but with a vision of possible mutual correction (Todorov 1995).

These types of questions were then distant to me, like strained attempts to talk abstractly about the nature of man, with their usual tendency to generalize and covert or overt ideologizing, to which I was almost intolerant as a person who had spent his entire life in the over-ideologized situation of the over-centralized state. But my reaction was not only personal – social or cultural anthropology itself is generally sceptical and sometimes even hostile to such generalizations.

At that time, I was much more interested in various questions surrounding his books on the Conquest of America (Todorov 1982) based on the accounts of the conquerors, as well as the reciprocal stories of the Aztecs about the same events (Todorov, Baudot 1983). At one of our first meetings, I drew his attention to the recently published book by Gananath Obeyesekere on a topic similar to Todorov’s (Obeyesekere 1992), in which he sharply criticized him. So my question was whether and how he intended to respond to this criticism. He replied in French, haughtily and sarcastically that it had been read in a biased manner, but after a short pause and with a more careful choice of words, he added that he himself was not satisfied with the level of conceptualization in “The Conquest of America”, which was evident in his later books.¹

¹ He spoke about this publicly much later in his conversations with Catherine Portevin: “However, I had the feeling that conceptually my analysis was not sufficient, that I needed to go further” (Todorov 2019, 186).

Todorov and anthropologists yesterday and today

Tzvetan Todorov did not define himself as an anthropologist, as can be seen from the quote at the beginning of this text, nor do anthropologists today recognize him as one of their number – his name is not mentioned in modern accepted anthropological encyclopedias. For example, in one of the most recent and largest 12-volume specialized encyclopedias, which totals 6839 pages, edited by the long-time director of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland (Callan 2018), not only is there no article in his name, which is understandable, but he does not appear in the extensive index and bibliographical references. His name also is not found in The Open Encyclopedia of Anthropology (formerly the Cambridge Encyclopedia of Anthropology). He is cited only once in the anthropology section of the Oxford Research Encyclopedia as an example among many others for the application of phenomenological approaches in anthropology and in particular in the study of interethnic and intercultural contact – ‘these are just some of the possible fields of research for what could be called an anthropology of the other’s Other’ (Leistle 2022).

In the recent past, however, the picture is somewhat different – Todorov’s figure has often been in the field of view of anthropologists of different profiles, mainly in the US and France: even the Encyclopedic Dictionary of the Science of Language (Ducrot and Todorov 1972) received a positive review in the journal *American Anthropologist* (Pei 1973). “The Discovery of America” provoked strong reactions, which will be discussed below. “We and the Others” is the focus of Scott Michaelsen and his reflections on the foundations and limitations of multiculturalism (Michaelsen 1993), as well as of Gérard Lenclud, who rightly notes that although anthropology is focused on human diversity, it does not have a monopoly on the study and understanding of it (Lenclud 1991, 53), then devotes his entire article to the analysis of a single book by Todorov (1989).²

When he argues that the history of the concept of the Other in anthropology is yet to be written, Johannes Fabian insists (Fabian 2006, 149) that it is important to include in this conversation the books of

² The title of Todorov’s 1989 book “*Nous et les autres : la réflexion française sur la diversité humaine*” was altered for the 1993 English translation of the book to “On human diversity: nationalism, racism, and exoticism in French thought”.

François Hartog “The Mirror of Herodotus” (Hartog 1980) and Tzvetan Todorov “The Discovery of America: The Question of the Other”.

James Clifford (1983, 143) refers to Todorov and a large part of his work on Mikhail Bakhtin when discussing the concept of heteroglossia and his claim that what applies to languages applies to cultures and subcultures (Todorov 1981, 88–93).

Todorov’s disappearance from the field of view of anthropologists today is not a topic for my reflection here. However, I can assume that it is most likely due to his interdisciplinary approach, which practically marginalizes him. Moreover, he is recognized as a serious interlocutor mainly among anthropologists critical of our discipline, postmodernists, reformers and experimenters, whose influence exploded and was exhausted at the moment of its apogee. With this text, however, I want to somewhat correct this: first, with what I have done so far – to point out very briefly the real influence of Todorov on anthropology, which has remained unappreciated to this day; second, and in connection with the above, to focus on one of the key debates in anthropology of the late 20th century, a history in which Todorov and his book are involved, albeit as silent participants.

The Conquest of America. The Question of the Other

Since more than forty years have passed, I will briefly recall that *The Conquest of America* is a moralistic book about “how the self discovers the other” (Todorov 1992, 7).³ It is moralistic because of its focus and genre: in answering the question of how we relate to the other, the author is more interested in the present than in the past, as a result of which an instructive story is created⁴ (Todorov 1992, 7). Stories have been selected from thousands of testimonies, on the basis of which a meta-narrative has been built, organized into four phases – discovery, conquest, love and recognition. For each of the phases, typical characters have been selected on the basis of exemplary stories: Christophorus Columbus, for whom Todorov uses the Spanish version of the name Cristóbal Colón; Hernán Cortés, Bartolomé de las Casas, Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda, Bernardino de Sahagún, Diego Durán. For

³ “the discovery *self* makes the *other*” (Todorov 1984, 3).

⁴ In the original edition “*une histoire exemplaire*” (Todorov 1982, 12); in the English translation “an exemplary story” (Todorov 1984, 4).

the purposes of the analysis, a typology has been constructed, which unfolds on three axes: axiomatic, praxeological, epistemological (Todorov 1992, 178).⁵

The first axis is that of value judgment: the other is good or bad, equal or inferior, loved or hated. The second axis is that of approaching the other: identifying or assimilating, accepting their values or imposing one's own image on the other. The third axis is that of getting to know the other: an endless series of nuances and degrees of knowledge about the other (Todorov 1992). There are some similarities between the three axes, but no causal relationships:

“Las Casas knows the Indians less than Cortés, but he loves them more than he does, and the paths of the two merge in their common assimilation policy” (Todorov 1992)

In this typology, Columbus is described entirely in negative categories. He does not love, does not know, does not identify; he discovers the territory but not the native people, “he discovered America but not the Americans” (Todorov 1992, 52).

Cortés embodies understanding, but an understanding that subjugates and destroys the other. One of the central questions in the book is also related to it, which will generate significant discussions: how is it possible for Cortés with his small group of adventurers to destroy the powerful empire of the Aztecs? Todorov seeks the answer in Cortés' flexibility and improvisation, in his communicative abilities, to manipulate signs, to operate with symbols, to build indescribable performances with horses and rooks, to produce a discourse that gives him a strategic advantage and victorious moves. In particular, in his ability to get to know the local culture to the extent that he can project himself into its categories, so that he appears in their eyes as a resurrected and returned deity. Thus, Todorov arrives at a typological point of view: the clash between Cortés and Moctezuma is a conflict between a civilization that communicates with the world and a civilization that communicates with people (Todorov 1992, 240).

⁵ “To account for the differences that exists in actuality, we must distinguish among at least three axis, on which we can locate the problematics of alterity. ... a value judgment (axiological level) ... action of rapprochement or distancing in relation to the other (a praxeological level) ... I know or I am ignorant of the other's identity (... epistemic level)” (Todorov 1984, 185).

“The Indians give preference to the connection with the world, the Europeans to that with people; neither of the two in itself is superior to the other, and man needs both at the same time: if one gains from one, one inevitably loses from the other” (Todorov 1992, 241).

Contrary to the conqueror Cortés, Sahagún believes in the equality of people, insofar as he believes that every soul is equally close to God, and like a modern ethnographer he studies without evaluating the language and culture of the native people, he is inclined to idealize them, but preserves his identity, and to a large extent does not accept the mixing of cultures. For Todorov, he is a kind of precursor of the dialogue between cultures today, although for Sahagún this dialogue is a random and unconscious, uncontrolled impulse that is not brought to any method (Todorov 1992, 232). Nevertheless, Sahagún goes so far as to write a letter to the king proposing that the crown withdraw and the native people be left to govern themselves, from which of course nothing came.

Diego Durán allows himself to be changed by others to a slightly greater extent, not just by learning their language, but by fully accepting their everyday life, which is always a powerful instrument for transformation. He is also the first real translator to realize and discuss the difficulties of transforming the metaphors of one culture into another. This leads him to listen more carefully to the texts of the hymns and discuss them with their performers, who, like modern cultural consultants, guide him towards clarifying the meanings. Of course, for Durán, the main concern is the spread of faith, but he is tolerant of the hidden pagan concepts that shine behind the canonical practices.

It is impossible to list here all the characters and narrators to whom Todorov pays attention, I will only mention La Malinche, the translator of Cortés – one of the few female characters in the book (Todorov 1992, 98–100), as a mediator in communication and a prototype of the hybridization of cultures. For Catherine Portevin, she is a central character in “The Conquest of America”, an assessment that Todorov denies, insisting that there are no main characters in his work; each of them is a model or illustration of a certain attitude towards the other:

“For me, Malinche is, if not the main character (there is none in the book), then at least one of the most attractive figures. Incidentally,

on the cover of my book there is an engraving of her from the 16th century – Lienzo de Tlaxcala – where she stands between Cortés and Moctezuma: and for the Indians of that era she played a central role. I wrote this book with the feeling that I was rehabilitating La Malinche” (Todorov 2019, 181–182).⁶

Examining the speech of each of these characters, Todorov also notes the peculiarities of their narratives. For example, Sahagún presents impressively large amounts of material, but does not interpret it, does not translate it into the categories of his culture; in fact, he takes a modest step in the direction of modern ethnology, comparing the Aztec and Roman pantheons. The aim is to convey the voices of his local informants in their native Nahuatl language (the imperial language of the Aztecs), and his own descriptions and comments in Spanish, both types of texts being accompanied by the visual language of the illustration. Of course, this scheme is flawed (Todorov 1992, 220): to a large extent the voice of his carefully selected informants is present in the Spanish translation, and Sahagún in the text in Nahuatl. In the Spanish text, some parts have been omitted and others have been added, since they have a different function and are addressed to a different audience, and thus “the dialogue of voices becomes even more elusive” (Todorov 1992, 218). From here the question of dialogue is carried over and developed in the final part of the book:

“I have sought not a terrain of compromise but the path of dialogue. I question, I transpose, I interpret these texts; but also I let them speak ... and defend themselves. From Columbus to Sahagun, these figures do not speak the same language as the one I speak; but one does not let the other live merely by leaving him intact, any more than by obliterating his voice entirely. I have tried to see them ... as forming one of the interlocutors of our dialogue” (Todorov 1984, 250–251).

⁶ La Malinche is a main topic of Todorov’s discussion with the Nobel Prize laureate for literature Octavio Paz, who sees in her figure not the traitor, but the embodiment of the future of the Mexican people as a syncretic and hybrid people (Todorov 2019, 182); for the perception of La Malinche in different eras in relation to Mexican cultural identity, see more in McBride-Limaye (1988); feminist authors acknowledge this valorization, but criticize that authors like him see in the Mayan woman torn apart by dogs – the second female character in the book – only an object, a victim, but not a subject, not an agency.

In this dialogue, Todorov positions himself and some of his characters through Bakhtin's category of *'otstranenie'*, "outsideness", the affirmation of the other's foreignness, through which his affirmation as a subject is achieved. Todorov develops it further, condensing his statement biographically:

"He who feels sorry for his fatherland is a sensitive novice; he who feels everywhere as if he were on his native land is already strong; but only he is perfect for whom the whole world is like a foreign land (I, the Bulgarian living in France, borrow this quote from Edward Saïd, a Palestinian living in the US, who discovered it in Erich Auerbach – a German who emigrated to Turkey)" (Todorov 1992, 238).

He immediately realizes, however, that exile is not always fruitful, because in a society made up of exiles, dialogue dies, at the expense of unhealthy eclecticism and comparatism, replaced by "the ability to love a little of everything, to sympathize weakly with every choice, without ever defining oneself" (Todorov 1992, 238). Hence follows an unexpected praise of ethnology, revealing the diversity of voices. I say unexpected because it occurs at a time of increasing self-reflection and self-criticism, which presents it as part of colonization and postcolonialism, as a Western discourse subordinating others, as an unhealthy, immoral, and unscientific hegemony. Todorov, who largely opens the door to such studies (his position here is clear – right at the beginning of the book he states that this is the greatest genocide in human history), is unequivocal: "the dialogue between cultures, characteristic of our era and represented in our opinion by ethnology, which is the fruit of colonialism and at the same time is evidence of its agony" (Todorov 1992, 238). With this assessment, anthropology receives a defence from the position of "unexpectedness", from a scientist who will never define himself as an anthropologist.

Here I will digress. To the brief references regarding the influence of Tzvetan Todorov on anthropology, I must add something important, which is the subject of a separate essay in itself, namely, his role in promoting Edward Saïd and his book "Orientalism" (Saïd 1980) among French academic and cultural circles, including anthropologists. The two had known each other since the early seventies at Columbia University, and later developed a friendly relationship. Todorov

found him a publisher and translator in France just a year after the publication of the original (Collier 2020), wrote the preface to the translation (Todorov 2003), and later became involved in its defence (Todorov 2004). He is not spared criticism either:

«L'Orientalisme ne résout pas toutes les questions qu'il pose. Il refuse l'entité «Orient» mais ne nous dit pas si la civilisation islamique (ou égyptienne, ou indienne, etc.) ne possède pas certains traits différents de la civilisation occidentale (et si oui, lesquels). Il condamne la compréhension assimilatrice et impérialiste pratiquée par la science officielle, mais ne nous apprend pas s'il existe une compréhension différente, où l'autre n'est pas réduit et soumis au même. Il fustige l'intolérance des hommes à l'égard des « barbares » mais ne nous enseigne pas comment concilier l'impératif moral « soyez tolérants » avec la constatation historique : « les hommes ne l'ont jamais été »; il ne nous indique pas la voie d'une nouvelle morale lucide, non utopiste» (Todorov 2003, 9–10).⁷

Later, he would add to them that the gaze of others has the privilege of a “*regard éloigné*” (Lévi-Strauss 1983), which are certainly influenced by their prejudices and the need to create their own other, but the questions remain open:

«ne pouvait-il pas être déterminé aussi, au moins partiellement, par son objet”; “à partir de quel moment une généralisation devient-elle illégitime; “L'«Orient» n'existe peut-être pas, l'«Arabe» non plus, mais y a-t-il un intérêt de parler d'Égyptiens? de Cairotes? de l'esprit d'un quartier ou d'une rue? Said ne voulait pas se poser ce genre de questions et ne pouvait s'interroger sur ces identités-là, seraient elles mouvantes et hétérogènes: sinon il aurait risqué d'encourir les reproches que lui-même adressait aux orientalistes.

⁷ “Orientalism does not resolve all the questions it raises. It rejects the entity “the Orient” but does not tell us whether Islamic (or Egyptian, or Indian, etc.) culture possesses certain traits that differ from Western civilization (and if so, which ones). It condemns the assimilationist and imperialist understanding practiced by official science, but does not teach us whether there is a different understanding, where the other is not reduced and subjected to the same. He castigates human intolerance towards “barbarians” but does not teach us how to reconcile the moral imperative “be tolerant” with the historical observation that “humans have never been tolerant”; he does not show us the way to a new, lucid, non-utopian morality.” (Translation by V.G.).

Il se contenta donc d'étudier l'Occident – pourtant, lui aussi une généralisation» (Todorov 2004, 30).⁸

Despite these criticisms, as well as the great differences between them – e.g. Todorov is apolitical, while Said is strongly politically engaged with Yasser Arafat and the PLO – he warmly supports and recommends him: “*Ces réserves ne m’empêchaient pas de voir combien la lecture de Said était rafraîchissante*” (Todorov 2004, 30).⁹ The recommendations are reciprocal: at the same time that he launched “Orientalism” in a French cultural environment, Todorov wrote his book on the conquest of America, published in the United States in a series that was the responsibility of Edward Saïd.

The reception of the “Conquest of America”

Initially, there were few reactions from anthropologists, with specialists in Mesoamerica being quite reserved. For example, Christian Duverger (1983), an anthropologist and specialist in Mexico, the age of conquest, the processes of hybridization (*le métissage culturel et religieux*) and the literary legacy of Cortés, described the book as confusing or disturbing and accused the author of generalizing – his subject is the discovery and conquest of Mexico, while the claim is about America as a whole. Todorov’s reductionism was observed in relation to each of the key characters – Las Casas as the hero of the Europeans’ guilty conscience or Diego Durán as the hero of cultural mestizo. A few good words have also been said about the concluding chapter: about how knowing oneself goes through discovering the other in his difference and equality – a practice easy to say and difficult to do (Todorov 1992, 238).

In contrast to Duverger, in the same year the most authoritative French anthropological journal *L’Homme* published an encouraging

⁸ “Couldn’t it also be determined, at least partially, by its object?”; “At what point does a generalization become illegitimate?”; “The ‘Orient’ may not exist, nor may the ‘Arab,’ but is there any point in talking about Egyptians? About Cairo residents? About the spirit of a neighborhood or a street?” Said did not want to ask himself these kinds of questions and could not question these identities, even if they were fluid and heterogeneous: otherwise, he would have risked incurring the reproaches that he himself directed at Orientalists. He therefore contented himself with studying the West—yet another generalization.” (Translation by V.G.).

⁹ “These reservations did not prevent me from seeing how refreshing it was to read Said.” (Translation by V.G.).

review by Jean-Paul Dumont (1983), an anthropologist with fieldwork in the Philippines and Venezuela. He correctly presents Todorov's theses and characters in the different phases, characters and texts of discovery, conquest, love and knowledge, drawing attention, first, to the fact that the author combines work on texts created immediately at the time of the first contacts, 'warm' texts that are read in a 'cold' way – a modern and distanced interpretation that inserts old texts into new commentaries. Second, he points out the fact that Todorov himself is the result of cultural mixing, which in turn allows him to give "*au métissage une valeur heuristique*" (Dumont 1983, 124), avoiding two extremes, indicated in the author's own words:

"Le premier est la tentation de faire entendre la voix de ces personnages telle qu'en elle-même; de chercher à disparaître moi-même pour mieux servir l'autre. Le second est de soumettre les autres à soi, d'en faire des marionnettes dont on contrôle toutes les ficelles. Entre les deux j'ai cherché non un terrain de compromis, mais la voie du dialogue. J'interpelle, je transpose, j'interprète ces textes ; mais aussi, je les laisse parler (d'où tant de citations), et se défendre"¹⁰ (Dumont 1983; Todorov 1982, 254).¹¹

In his review, Dumont is sparing in criticism, although he finds Todorov's tone on the dialogue of cultures too optimistic in two respects: first, today there are strikingly more examples of massacres than examples of intercultural dialogues; second, the assessment of

¹⁰ "The first is the temptation to let these characters speak for themselves, to try to disappear myself in order to better serve the other. The second is to subjugate others to oneself, to turn them into puppets whose strings one controls. Between the two, I sought not a compromise, but the path of dialogue. I question, transpose, and interpret these texts; but I also let them speak for themselves (hence the many quotations) and defend themselves." (Translation by V.G.).

¹¹ The broader context in Todorov includes a previous reference to Lévinas that "*Notre époque ne se définit pas par le triomphe de la technique pour la technique, comme elle ne se définit pas par l'art pour l'art, comme elle ne se définit pas par le nihilisme. Elle est action pour un monde qui vient, dépassement de son époque – dépassement de soi qui requiert l'épiphanie de l'Autre*" (Todorov 1982, 253). Our period is not defined by the triumph of technology for technology's sake, as it is not defined by art for art's sake, as it is not defined by nihilism. It is action for a world to come, transcendence for its period – transcendence of self, which calls for epiphany of the Other" (Todorov 1984, 250).

The continuation of the quote cited is: "*De Colon à Sahagún, ces personnages ne parlaient pas le même langage que moi; mais ce n'est pas faire vivre l'autre que de le laisser intact, pas plus qu'on n'y arrive en oblitérant entièrement sa voix. Proches et lointains à la fois, j'ai voulu les voir comme formant l'un des interlocuteurs de notre dialogue*" (Todorov 1982, 254). From Columbus to Sahagún, these figures did not speak to same language as the one I speak; or one does not let the other live merely by leaving him intact, and more than by obliterating his voice entirely. I have tried to see them, both close and distant, as forming one of the interlocutors of our dialogue (Todorov 1984, 250–251).

contemporary anthropology is greatly overstated – “*une anthropologie du sujet reste à faire*” (Dumont 1983, 124). The conclusion, however, is highly commendable, insofar as Todorov poses the right questions, in fact the only essential question for anthropology.

Soon after the book was translated into English, the anthropologist Richard Handler published an extensive review in which he defined Todorov’s approach as ‘comparative hermeneutics’, expressed in a ‘provocative reading’ of chronicles and diverse testimonies (Handler 1985, 9), and the result of it – ‘an admirable and provocative book’ (Handler 1985, 13). The medieval and absolutist hermeneutics of Columbus are traced, opposed to the relativist and Machiavellian interpretative strategy of Cortés, as well as the radical relativism of Las Casas and Sahagún, denying manipulation and conquest (Handler 1985, 10). In the triumph of individualistic societies over hierarchical and ritualistic societies, Handler sees a direct influence of the classification of the French anthropologist Louis Dumont, although Todorov does not refer to it anywhere in the book (Handler 1985, 9).¹² The review ends with a subtle critique in the form of anticipated future criticisms, especially regarding ‘hermeneutic behaviour as a factor in so material an event as war’ (Handler 1985, 13). The eclectic use of methods from different disciplines is questioned, leading to easy conclusions and dubious generalizations. We know from history that the Aztecs were effective and efficient in the process of conquering and ideologically governing their neighbours. Furthermore, in the idea of Spanish superiority in interpretive philosophy there is a hidden evolutionism, which seems to contradict the cultural relativism professed by Todorov in this book (Handler 1985).

Five years later, David Carrasco, an anthropologist specializing in Mesoamerica and the history of religion, would describe the book as a “powerful entree into the hermeneutics of America that appears in Tzvetan Todorov’s aggressive study of the conquest of Mesoamerica by the Spaniards in the sixteenth century. Todorov considers the vital relationship, often underplayed in hermeneutical discourse, between interpretation, ethics, colonialism, and conquest” (Carrasco 1988, 152). Carrasco notes as important for him and Todorov the fact that the discovery of America changed European civilization. He points out that the book obeys the literary rule of unity of time, place, and action (The

¹² Handler has some grounds for this. Todorov himself, in his essay on Saïd, cites Louis Dumont among the authors who influenced him (Todorov 2004).

one-hundred-year period after Columbus, Mesoamerica, the Spanish perception of Indians). It traces how the narrative is organized around

“the monologues of Cristóbal Colón, the dialogues between Hernán Cortés and Moctezuma II, the discoveries of Bartolomé de Las Casas, the platonic imitations of Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda, Diego Durán’s hybrid reconstruction of Mesoamerican religions, and the seeds of the first ethnography found in the work of Bernardino de Sahagún. Throughout he traces the development of the typology of relations to native Americans, which negotiated the conquest and its genocide. At one end of this typology, the humans in America have no place, while at the other end, they just begin to appear as subjects” (Carrasco 1988, 153).

In this reading, Carrasco finds contradictory details, both regarding the main characters and regarding the entire “controversial mood” and “very firm voice punctuated with a record number of exclamation points” (Carrasco 1988) of the study. He disputes the reconstruction of Aztec society, especially in its part that it is overstructured, hierarchically organized, communicating orally and resistant to innovation. Indeed, the drama develops on their territory, in the midst of their order, against their social and cosmological organization: in comparison with the Spaniards, who are far from home, on foreign territory, understructured and underorganized. He assesses that in Todorov’s reading “Cortés is too much a hero”, which does not take into account other interpretations, according to which “the conquest of Tenochtitlan was less a conquest than it was a revolt of dominated peoples”.¹³ Carrasco contrasts the claim about the oral nature of culture and the deficit of innovations with new research published after Todorov’s book, according to which, for example, the hieroglyphic script of the Maya is fully functional and capable of

¹³ Carrasco refers to Ralph Beal, as well as Wolf (1949) and especially to Chapter 8, “Conquest of Utopia” (Carrasco 1988, 158). In another review, which is generally very positive, it is pointed out that Todorov is unaware of the political context of Spanish-Indian relations at the time of the conquest: “After all, Cortes’ writings on the Indian were informed in great measure by the conflict between the conqueror’s efforts at feudalistic political and economic control over the Indians, and the crown’s determination to incorporate the Indians as royal subjects. Similarly, Las Casas’ reference to the Indian caciques as natural lords hailed back to the Castilian concept of natural lord as defined in the Partidas. His suggestion that the king sign voluntary treaties with Indian natural lords was not a mechanism for the renunciation of the transatlantic kingdoms, but rather a way to eliminate the intermediaries between royal power and Indian authorities – the Spanish conquistadors.” (Tiryakian 1985, 521).

reflecting the nuances of oral speech.¹⁴ In the conclusion, the author dwells approvingly on the classification “*sociétés à sacrifice*”, “*sociétés à massacre*” and “*sociétés à massacrifice*”:

“He organizes this superlative comparison by noting the difference between Spanish murder and Aztec murder. The latter is a religious murder of individuals on home ground, in plain view, in ritual settings. The Spaniards invented aesthetic murder, killing groups of strangers away from their cities, denying the act and excluding ritual. And these are the germs of modern society, neither a sacrifice society nor a massacre society, but a mass sacrifice society based in part on a five-centuries-long process denying the others their say, their place, and their presence in the dialogue” (Carrasco 1988, 159–160).

Captain James Cook and Hernán Cortés

The book received a much more critical reading only ten years later, when the Sri Lankan anthropologist Gananath Obeyesekere called it “one of the most provocative books of our time” (Obeyesekere 1992, 16). In the chapter ‘Improvisation, Rationality, and Savage Thought’, more specific criticisms are formulated about Todorov’s thinking of the Aztecs in the categories of pre-literary cultures (Obeyesekere 1992, 18); that in Saussure’s dichotomy *langue/parole*, like other structuralists, he focuses on language rather than on speech practice. As a counterargument, a story by Bernal Díaz del Castillo is cited about how the Aztecs told the Spaniards in gastronomic detail how their captives would be cooked and eaten, which for Obeyesekere is a great example of the manipulation of conventional signs with the simple pragmatic aim of terrifying the Spaniards. In other words, communicative pragmatism and the manipulation of signs are not and could not be the monopoly of Cortés and his handful of adventurers.

The other line of criticism is about Todorov’s trust in the sources of the Spanish conquistadors, who are themselves responsible for the construction of stereotypical images of the difference of the locals. These are stereotypes that Todorov himself states that he wants to expose (Obeyesekere, 1992, 17). Hence the conclusion is that what

¹⁴ Carrasco (1988, 159) refers to Schele, L. and Miller, M. (1986) specifically for Maya writing; does not discuss Aztec writing.

Todorov says about Columbus also applies to Todorov himself: “he discovered America, but not the Americans” (Obeyesekere 1992, 19). The authorities on which Obeyesekere relies are Max Weber and his concept of pragmatic rationality, as well as Clifford Geertz and his essay on common sense (Obeyesekere 1992, 20–21), and his real intellectual opponent is Marshall Sahlins and his book ‘Islands of History’ (Sahlins 1985), and Tzvetan Todorov is indicated as his real intellectual predecessor.

Tzvetan Todorov never responded to these criticisms¹⁵, but Sahlins¹⁶ responded to them comprehensively and systematically on a total of 318 pages in 4 chapters, 17 appendices that occupy one third of the book, one table, three maps and eight figures (Sahlins 1995), which formed one of the most important debates in anthropology since the end of the 20th century, in which, beyond concrete factual questions, key problems for the discipline were formulated (Borofsky 1997, 255). At the heart of the debate is Sahlins’ claim that the Hawaiian population perceived Captain James Cook in the categories of a cosmological and ritual system as the god Lono, as a special case of using a cultural framework to make sense of historical events. In his criticism, Obeyesekere calls this a European projection, a romantic and oriental fantasy, and not a local reality: Europeans infantilize non-European peoples, and Hawaiians in particular. From here the debate spills over into larger questions of rationality. For Obeyesekere, all people everywhere are universally rational; for Sahlins, each culture uses a different logic, the behaviour of Hawaiians must be understood within their own cultural categories, and not be judged by Western understandings of rationality. The debate also reaches the figure of the anthropologist, the authority figure who can represent others, think and speak for them. Obeyesekere is convinced that being of Eastern origin, he is able to better understand non-European peoples, which applies to anthropologists of non-European origin in general. For Sahlins, this is a manifestation of epistemological essentialism; anthropology is an established profession with inherent professional

¹⁵ The topic of avoiding public debates is clarified by Todorov, e.g. “The question you are raising about the absence of a polemical thrust to my intellectual work takes my mind in two different directions, which are not necessarily independent: I can ask myself about the reasons I may give to justify this choice or about the causes that may have led me to it, sometimes without realizing it” (Postel 2008).

¹⁶ I should especially note that in his initial response and during the debate, Sahlins never mentioned Todorov and his book on the conquest of America. This is probably due to the fact that he does not consider him to be a specialist on the subject.

training and preparation for fieldwork, which should correct diverse cultural habits of thought.

What is the relevance of the development of this debate to Tzvetan Todorov? In addition to direct criticism, both Sahlins and Obeyesekere draw parallels between what happened to Captain James Cook in 1778–1779 and the early 16th-century relationship between Hernán Cortés and the natives, both asking whether non-Europeans saw the European as a deity in this contact? Moreover, Obeyesekere dedicates his book to his Sri Lankan driver who became a victim of terrorism, drawing a direct parallel with Tzvetan Todorov, who dedicates his book to a Mayan woman who made a vow to her dead husband not to remarry, for which she was given by the Spanish to the dogs who tore her apart (Todorov 1992, 235). At the end of these academic skirmishes, also filled with personal attacks, the question of Captain James Cook and the Hawaiians, Cortés and Moctezuma begins to seem secondary. As Clifford Geertz notes in his analysis of the debate, what remains truly important are “the questions they raise about how it is we are to go about making sense of the acts and emotions of distant peoples in remote times. What does ‘knowing’ about ‘others’ properly consist in? Is it possible? Is it good?” (Geertz 1995, 4).

These questions remain open to this day. At first glance, in a time when there are no more undiscovered societies, when the topic of initial contact seems to have been exhausted, as if there is no reason to re-read Tzvetan Todorov. But we live in a time when there is a real regression in the attitude towards the Other, towards the different, a time when the belief that “communication without violence exists and can be defended as a value” (Todorov 1992, 177) is weakening, at such a moment Todorov’s book becomes relevant again. We are unlikely to accept uncritically his conception of Aztec groupthink (Geertz 1995, 5) or his general lack of awareness that there can be an “Us” without an “Other”: if there were none, we would have had to invent them. We cannot ignore uncritically his overly broad understanding of dialogue, in which human sacrifice seems to become acceptable because it is culturally integrated. Of course, Todorov does not state this directly; this is a hidden mood that permeates the entire book, but it mostly shines through the figures of those who love others and understand others, to whom Todorov pays great attention – especially the monks Bernardino de Sahagún and Diego Durán – and their attempts to normalize human sacrifice.

The typology developed at the end of the book: “*sociétés à sacrifice*” as opposed to “*sociétés à massacre*”, as well as the attempt to present 20th-century totalitarianism by combining the worst features of both in the category of “*sociétés à massacrer*” is not at all convincing: they first direct their repression and extermination at the internal enemy before proceeding to mass slaughter outside their borders. However, these and other criticisms formulated in the course of this text seem secondary, since the important and still uncanceled task of anthropology is to keep the conversation going (Geertz 1995, 6). I think that in re-reading Todorov, Obeyesekere, Sahlins and Geertz, I am doing just that.

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