The Adversities of anthropological ethnography in prison context

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abstract The risk of biological contagion from the new coronavirus pandemic presented unforeseen challenges for fieldwork. This article is based on the reflections of my ethnographic field in the penitentiary system of Ceará, in Brazil, seeking to access the relationships and the effects of the growth of the penitentiary archipelago. One of the objectives is to contribute to comparative studies, considering that each federative unit presents substantial differences in the administrative procedures of its local prison system. The report was written due to the need to discuss the contexts of the prisons, but also to reflect on anthropological ethnography and the uncertainty about life and death in the face of suffocating realities.

keywords Ethnography. Prisons. Pandemic. Fieldwork.

As adversidades da etnografia antropológica no contexto prisional

resumo O risco de contágio biológico da pandemia do novo coronavírus apresentou desafios imprevistos para o trabalho de campo. Este artigo baseia-se nas reflexões do meu campo etnográfico no sistema penitenciário do Ceará, no Brasil, buscando acessar as relações e os efeitos do crescimento do arquipélago penitenciário. Um dos objetivos é contribuir para estudos comparativos, considerando que cada unidade federativa apresenta diferenças substanciais nos procedimentos administrativos de seu sistema prisional local. O relato foi escrito devido à necessidade de discutir os contextos das prisões, mas, também, refletir sobre a etnografia antropológica e a incerteza sobre a vida e a morte diante de realidades sufocantes.

palavras-chave Etnografia. Prisões. Pandemia. Trabalho de campo.

Las adversidades de la etnografía antropológica en el contexto carcelario

resumen El riesgo de contagio biológico de la nueva pandemia del coronavirus presentó desafíos imprevistos para el trabajo de campo. Este artículo se basa en las reflexiones de mi campo etnográfico en el sistema penitenciario del Ceará, en Brasil, buscando acceder a las relaciones y los efectos del crecimiento del archipiélago penitenciario. Uno de los objetivos es contribuir a los estudios comparativos, considerando que cada unidad

federativa presenta diferencias sustanciales en los procedimientos administrativos de su sistema penitenciario local. El artículo fue escrito por la necesidad de discutir los contextos de las cárceles, pero también de reflexionar sobre la etnografía antropológica y la incertidumbre sobre la vida y la muerte ante realidades asfixiantes.

palabras clave Etnografía. Cárceles. Pandemia. Trabajo de campo.

Introduction

Fieldwork in prison context encounters all sorts of adversities and routine contingencies typical of these types of social establishments-institutions. Preferably, despite the porosity of its walls and borders, entrances and exits are targets of some type of state control. With an increasingly restricted circulation, anthropological fieldwork within prison spaces finds greater interest in Brazil, covering since the work of prison security agents (SABAINI, 2012) and even the dynamics and *movement* of criminal collectives (BIONDI, 2010; 2018).

Manuela Cunha (2014) reviewed a variety of themes and the different ways of approaching prison-in-context and its relationship with the intramural and extramural worlds. The use of the argument of the notorious insecurity of prison spaces is a resource used worldwide by state agents in their distrust to open up the observation of the daily life of spaces of deprivation of liberty. The restriction is not exclusive to ethnographers, but also to several state and parastatal social organizations that have reported great difficulty in accessing information and physical facilities. In reality, it would be difficult to point to a period of regular and facilitated entry of researchers in Brazilian prisons, as the existence of official protocols in some cases, still leaves researchers dependent on negotiations and specific contexts for carrying out fieldwork.

This article is based on the reflections of my ethnographic field in the prison system of the federative state of Ceará, in Brazil, looking forward to accessing the relationships and effects of the growth in the penitentiary archipelago. One of the objectives is to contribute to comparative studies, considering that each federative unit presents substantial differences in the administrative procedures of its local prison system. The expansion affected the irradiation of mobilizations that strongly impact the neighborhoods and cities in the region, by affecting the daily lives of thousands of people, either by the possibility of imprisonment or by the conflicts between the state and criminal collectives. In recent years, the increase in incarceration has resulted in the foundation and expansion of prison factions in all regions of the country, reflecting on serial incidents "against the state" of Ceará, which reacts with militarized intervention in prisons and popular communities. The transformation from justice management to prison administration, with a focus on "zero contact" and increased discipline procedures, providing for individual and collective punishments, substantially changed the ways of approaching this topic of study.

Declared by the World Health Organization (WHO), the global emergency of the new coronavirus pandemic ignites the warning about the worsening of the scenario that already presented the proliferation of communicable diseases in overcrowded cells, with reduced access to water and regular conditions that maintain low immunity for people deprived of their liberty. The lack of psychosocial and medical teams working in prison spaces is compounded by the overpopulation that affects the persistence of unsanitary conditions. Being a national epicenter of COVID-19, Ceará announced, still in April 2020, that its system of Intensive Care Unities (ICU) collapsed, a situation that was partially resolved by the construction of field hospitals and the increase of restrictive measures for all the population. Still, the situation in prisons is uncertain due to the unknown number of vulnerable adults in custody, as well as people with chronic diseases, the elderly and even pregnant women challenged by the proliferation of viral respiratory infections and the collapse of the public health system. A risk faced by the lack of prospects for the greatest humanitarian and health crisis in contemporary human societies.

Field, alliances, and trajectory in Brazilian prisons

Prisons field recommends a double movement by the ethnographer. It involves creativity to open up planned and unexpected paths (BIONDI, 2010; 2018), and fieldwork is a place of strength and permanent reflexivity about the relationship between anthropology and the researcher in the context of deprivations, inequalities, and social misery. As Jania Aquino (2010, p.97) teaches, it is a place for the ethnographer's performances and the "forms of dramatizations that take shape based on the expectations of people and collectives subjects" of the ethnography. Thus, it places us in a "world of considerations".

Sometimes, in the procedures of entry, stay, and exit, the influences emanating from the bureaucratic-political field, form the hegemony of more closed organizational views. Considering the initial dilemmas and difficulties described, it is necessary to search for "creative improvisations" (BARREIRA, 2008, p. 35) in the face of external limits imposed on fieldwork. I have been looking for other ways to enter the prisons, or at least, "border" their surroundings. Condition before the social distance measures of the pandemic, occurring under the context of urban insecurity and "war on crime" (PAIVA, 2019).

The risk of biological contagion from the coronavirus pandemic posed unforeseen challenges for fieldwork. As mentioned by Elise Hjalmarson, Nina Kiderlno, and Sonja Ruud (2020), the abuses faced by marginalized, racialized, and incarcerated populations are well documented by biomedicine, even if the principle of "no harm" and informed consent is practiced. The authors invite us to reconsider how to do ethnography, maintaining body distance. Before the pandemic, the normative procedure for submitting a project to the university ethics committee and the Penitentiary Administration Secretariat seems to have been rendered unfeasible by militarization and draconian measures of severe state control within prisons. This hardening even affected the treatment of the family members of persons deprived of their liberty. Therefore, the approach to this theme reinforced the need

for attention so as not to intensify the inequalities and the exploitation of suffering brought by deprivation of freedom.

Reflecting on my more favorable condition than for my interlocutors during the pandemic is an important exercise to measure the type of relationship established for the research. From a social background of a working-class family in the federative state of Amazonas, in the northern region of the country, and now living in a shared apartment, my Ph.D. candidate position, after have lived in a popular neighborhood in the city of Fortaleza, is much more comfortable for me than it is for the interlocutors directly facing the effects of prisons on their lives. Surviving on a scholarship, and faced with precarious conditions in the production of academic knowledge, when seeking an alliance with people affected in some way by prisons, I was challenged by reports of pain, suffering, longing, and psychological and physical violence. This means that the limits of my action are affected by the adversities of the social reality of the fieldwork.

The initial research contact was made primarily with family members and other people engaged in the prison issue, mainly black women from different communities, demanding reflexivity about being a straight man of Amazonian origin and a professional researcher. Perhaps, such social categories of social differentiation were sufficient to stay away from the threats of criminal proceedings against family members I met in the mobilizations against the accusations of institutional torture systematically practiced by state agents, as happened in 2019, and was accompanied by my fieldwork.

Thus, I am faced with affective and violent practices that persist even if alliances and dialogical and comprehensive relations are practiced. In other words, the exercise of bordering prisons, directly involved me in its micropolitics and the different agencies and ways of thinking, acting, and feeling. Fieldwork emerges in a field of domination, subjection, struggles, and resistance, regardless of the presence or absence of social scientists, so that these conditions of possibility indicate the limits of anthropological ethnography.

My surprise at the coronavirus pandemic, adopting social isolation and interrupting fieldwork, is still a minor consequence compared to the people that I have been accompanying their trajectory in prison. These people have been prevented from making the social visit since the second half of March, limiting themselves to exchanging letters in a service that they criticize. I am facing the limit of monitoring the prison issue, with reduced scope for action in a research field that is directly affected by bureaucratic and legal disputes over prison policies.

Consequently, the issue of incarceration is in full dispute at the local and national level. It is present in symbolic struggles for defense or opposition to the expansion of prisons, therefore, due to the criminal hardening or detainee policies. Somehow, the difficulties imposed for entering the prisons, motivated me to search for alliances forged in the "running of the struggle", placing the practice of research in the context of political struggles in the social field, however, never intending the protagonism of people directly affected. The

effects of pandemics on prisons also make me feel great empathy for the distress of these people.

Adriana Vianna and Juliana Farias (2011) discuss the relationship between violence and gender, demonstrating how the pain of loss challenges the lives of mothers who had loved ones killed by state agents, transforming it into political action. The social construction of pain and the importance of listening is well known in the contribution of Veena Das (2008). For these reasons, the local and national dispute, for the defense or opposition to the expansion of the prisons, therefore, for the criminal hardening or action of extrication policies, finds another urgent outline brought by the context of the pandemic.

Accordingly, in addition to the encounter with the Other, the use of insertion and interlocution strategies seeks to recognize the diversity of ways of existence. All stages of the research follow appropriate parameters that translate into a moral stance away from any exercise of symbolic domination, or that put people involved in the research at risk. Searching the margins of the state (DAS; POOLE, 2008) means taking care to avoid re-declassifying. Ethnography can be understood as the passage from experience to the text, as an important phase of translation and reflection on power relations and personal interests of the ethnographer, an essential dilemma for anthropology in a dramatic world "in becoming" (TURNER, 1974).

Pandemic death and the reflection in fieldwork

In April 2020, at least 23,124 men and women were in the custody of the Ceará prison system. Of the total, 22,048 are men and 1,076 women, and most of whom are still awaiting a judicial sentence. In comparison, in May 2008 the prison population was 12,481 - 344 of whom were women -, an increase of 85.2% in the total number of persons deprived of their liberty. In 2019, according to data from the National Council of Justice (CNJ), this prison system registered only 11,613 of rated capacity[1].

Most are men who receive social visits from black and poor women who identify themselves as mothers, sisters, grandparents, wives and daughters that somehow together face the trajectory in prisons. They demonstrate great loyalty in this period that can last for days, months and even years. On the other hand, women prisoners face the greatest deprivation, as gender oppression has an impact on abandonment by the networks of parents and sociability after imprisonment. It is common to observe their mothers and daughters on social visit days. Women taking care of women, but many will never receive visits or assistance while in prison.

Currently, families seek information and the right to health of the prison population. The information has always been scarce and of great importance in the prison system. The "zero contact doctrine" is not only a way to break the communication inside and outside the wall, but it also deprives and makes potential enemies of the state, the families, who report the feeling of state kidnapping of their family members. This doctrine was put into practice

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[1] Number of person deprived of liberty or beds a facility can hold.

by removing televisions, cell phones, water fountains and electricity from cells and pavilions in prison units. Since 2019, a rigorous and truculent military control that seeks to continue the war of the public security system against organized crime has been pursued. Thus, all fieldwork is transported to an area of exception and anthropological research is greatly compromised by the lack of protocols that can account for such a complex and risky reality.

The day before the official suspension of social visits in the Ceará prison system, on March 17, 2020, the CNJ published Recommendation 62 in order to guide justice systems throughout the country during the pandemic, to avoid the collapse of the Brazilian prison system due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In fact, despite some efforts by government and state authorities, the proliferation of the virus has found favorable ground.

The press has been the main source of information about the proliferation of pandemics in prisons. In May 2020, according to a press leak, at least 426 cases of the disease were confirmed. In total, 225 are correctional officers, 142 inmates and 59 outsourced servers. There were 268 recoveries of those infected by the disease. The Women's Penitentiary recorded 34 confirmations, approximately 3.9% of its population. In the prison unit for the elderly, gays, transgender women[2], bisexuals, wheelchair users and men who respond to gender crimes, the contamination is greatest with 48 who are positive for the new coronavirus. The local penitentiary administration secretariat recognizes only the death of two prisoners by COVID-19, a man and a woman. This report was released with information about a supermax prison, not yet opened, transformed into isolation for inmates with mild cases. Now called Supermax Health Infirmary, it is originally aimed at those accused of being leaders of criminal factions.

These numbers only represent a partial and disfigured reality of the real adversities experienced by the prison population and their families. Daiana Stanley (2020) recently reflected on humanitarian disengagement measures without proper support for community reintegration, mentioning that it is not possible to substitute one evil for the other, abandoning people with chronic diseases and older people to their own devices. However, this problem is even more delicate for the case of the Brazilian plutocracy, which originated in a genocidal, colonial and slave past, and which faces yet another expected emptying of its democratic appearance. Ceará's case highlights that the systemic violence force not only subdues people deprived of their liberty, but also their families and communities that seek rights and access to justice. In essence, they are criminalized as riots supporters and associated with ordinary crime.

Angela Davis (2003) contributed to the understanding of the industrial-prison complex and how male domination further reflects and consolidates gender inequalities in social life. However, Brazilian anthropology proposes to dismantle the system of truths that

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[2] Nascimento (2018) conducted research on travestilities and violences in the narratives of transvestites imprisoned in Ceará describing the transgressions of gender binarism in conflict with colonialism that establishes a rigid gender dichotomy assumed by the state. Consequently, bureaucracy practices ways of making transvestites and transgender women invisible violating their gender technologies.

aims to perpetuate the logic of war against the dangerous ones transposed of "pacification" (*pacificação*), recently recovered in the Pacifying Police Unit (UPP) of Rio de Janeiro (OLIVEIRA FILHO, 2016). In the colonial context, pacification means oversizing the emergence of a moralized new Christian, forgetting the military and violent character of these processes of conquest. The old subterfuge to accuse the displaced and insubordinate of being aggressive and radical. Veena Das (2020) recently wrote that the semester was brutal before the coronavirus attack, and how belligerent governments bring new reflections on how new and old media reinforce authoritarianism. I have no reason to oppose the same conclusion for the Brazilian case, as we observe in the national political field the authoritarian and paramilitary escalation based on fake news and political violence.

In the context of a pandemic that divides who will suffocate and who will survive, this type of reflexive engagement for the anthropology that does not just observe the "normality" of things, as required by neoliberal thinking, seems to be decisive. Wendy Brown (2015) precisely pointed out how the promiscuous neoliberal reason configures all elements of existence in economic aspects, turning us everywhere into *homo economicus* and only *homo economicus*. On the other hand, Mary Douglas (2001) made us think about the zones of limits, margins, and borders that overflow the society, through the dangers that threaten the transgressors in the languages of mutual extortion. Created in another crisis of the global authoritarian escalation, the reflection of Judith Butler (2004, 2009) locates the place of prisons and their known biological risk as just a materialization of the pro-war rhetoric against marginalized, racialized and imprisoned people, precarious life registered but not recognized and apprehended as grievable life, never lived nor lost in the full sense.

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