



Roundtable: Answers by Simone Toji

written by Simone Toji
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As a researcher who was raised in Brazil, my uncertainty and dilemmas may have a different punch compared to other cases. The context of uncertainty in Brazil includes a history implicated in processes of colonialism (Hollanda 1995) and notions of economic development (Prado Jr 2011, Cardoso and Faletto 1970) that contributed to a sense of a country in continuing state of transformation. While the transformations related to processes of colonialism triggered a search for Brazil to become an independent nation, the transformations involving ideas of development concentrated mostly on the pursuit of making Brazil a democratic country. In this continuing movement, knowledge and action have often been associated to understanding the problems that “deterred” the full blossoming of Brazil as a nation and/or a democratic country. These problems – extreme social inequalities or economic vulnerabilities, for instance – were recognized as sources of dilemmas and precarities that have been defining Brazil’s uncertain course.



My biography has been affected by these conditions in a certain way. In a time of continued economic crisis in Brazil, I chose to be an anthropologist, which increased the rate of uncertainty in my professional life. As a child of an unaffluent immigrant family in Brazil, I upset many expectations of a “bright future” by not opting for a classic career in law, medicine or engineering. However, the urge to “tackle inequalities”, “do justice”, “fight for rights” in the country opened modest possibilities for a professional trajectory. Since my undergraduate studies, I have had the opportunity to work in non-governmental organizations, projects and governmental organizations related to contemporary “social problems” in Brazil, such as homeless people, landless workers, impoverished craftsmen, or under-represented populations.

My most enduring work has been as a public servant responsible for managing activities and projects within Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) policies in the Instituto do Patrimônio Histórico e Artístico Nacional^[1] (IPHAN). Just after finishing my master’s studies in sociology and anthropology, in 2005 a call for numerous posts in this governmental organization was announced. The move to develop this sector, in fact, reflected a larger context.

The creation of ICH policies in Brazil is concomitant to the reconfiguration of the Brazilian state in the democratization process after the military regime of the 1960s and 1970s. Following the Constitution of 1988, the national ICH policy introduced a concept of heritage attached to the existence of multiple “identities” and the contribution to the “formation of the Brazilian society” (Decree 3551/2000). Through its implementation, popular, indigenous and black groups that were previously excluded would finally be represented as part of the Brazilian nation. This brought substantial changes to Brazil’s cultural heritage sector. Politically, it prompted the critique that previous heritage policies generally celebrated expressions of colonial and elite cases. Administratively, it changed the structure within the national cultural heritage apparatus by creating new divisions and departments in IPHAN, requiring the employment of staff specialized in sociology and anthropology, and encouraging municipalities and provinces to create their own local and regional ICH-related units. Conceptually,



the national ICH policy in Brazil instigated the transformation from a notion of “artistic and historic heritage” (Chuva 1998) to the idea of “cultural heritage”, i.e. from the technical exceptionality and historical notability of material exemplars to the ordinary and processual elements involved in a more anthropological understanding of heritage (Bortolotto 2007).

By joining IPHAN in 2006, I became an actor in the ICH field. Yet, I never did away with my academic training and sensibility. An academic career was not a concrete possibility at the time, however research and theoretical debates in the humanities continued to spark my interest. In the meantime, the ICH field allowed me to test the potentialities of holding multiple perspectives as an official and a researcher.

Are these developments, usually condemned as corrupting us as scholars and leading to the death of pure research, introducing some kind of innovation vis-à-vis established academic work? Does existential and professional uncertainty have epistemological potential?

Contexts of uncertainties, either in terms of neoliberal precarities or political and economic inconstancy, can provide scholarly innovation as long as researchers are able to experience different positionalities that open unexplored realities capable of expanding the academic debates.

Thus, existential and professional uncertainty can prompt the discovery of different epistemological standards in the making of science by questioning established oppositions, such as the one between actor and observer, or the usual conceptual practice of overgeneralizing meaningful particularities up to the point of disconnecting them from reality. Another potentiality of this condition is the tendency to make interdisciplinary engagements, since the structures in the systems of knowledge production can become more fluid.

For example, my academic training helped to situate myself and other actors of



the ICH field within processes of long-term duration. It also helped me to pay attention to the impact of practices instead of relying only on discourses and written evidence. On the other hand, my experience as a public servant revealed that the state is not an abstract entity, but it is an impermanent arena of disputes and tensions (Toji 2011) that is usually overlooked. In this way, the scholar in me pushed for a more reflexive performance in public service, whilst the official in me asked for awareness in locating concepts such as the “state” in concrete situations and practices. The “reflexive public servant” stimulated a critical approach in questioning certain practices in the implementation of public policies and in opening space for the discussion of creative measures to deal with the needs of specific groups in the ICH field. The “situated scholar” became conscious that alternative theoretical standards should be explored in order to give consistency to the elaborate experiences brought about by the ICH field.

What are the restrictions and weaknesses of ethnographic multipositionality imposed by neoliberal research conditions? Are the dilemmas faced by casual researchers distinct from those experienced by their tenured colleagues and, if so, how?

Research activities that are not based on a tenured position provide temporary research conditions in terms of funding, research peers, and research place. These conditions may impose a different model of knowledge production based more on “outbursts” of research outcome, whereas tenured researchers can rely on a continuing and “accumulative” model of knowledge production.

Although I did not experience fully any of these situations, I believe that if the dilemmas of casual researchers involves the effort to keep doing research under unstable conditions, the dilemmas of their tenured colleagues involves the attempt to continue doing research in addition to administrative and teaching responsibilities.

In my case, my two positionalities as researcher and civil servant can restrict



each other and become conflicting. There is a limit in which the scholar is able to inquire, as the public servant has to abide by an institutional hierarchy. There is a limit in which the official is able to follow the scholarly reflexivity, as there are dimensions in academic practice that are not permeable to translation into action. To reach these limits can be sometimes disorientating, other times, disappointing. For example, the unsatisfactory results of a cultural heritage inventory on the legacies of international migrants in the city of São Paulo prompted a desire to further explore questions of globalism, movement, and urban processes. The conditions of my multipositionality allow me to advance in a formal academic career only through sparse and concentrated periods of research. Besides consolidating my scholarly ability, my time studying for a doctoral degree provided me with enough time and reflexivity to reconstitute my positions as researcher and public servant.

Now I am back at IPHAN and I am also part of a research project (UNESCO frictions: heritage-making across global governance), which proposes to study the connections between different scales of governance with UNESCO ICH policy as a reference. This is now assisting me in re-establishing the ties between my scholarly knowledge and my public servant experience in the ICH field.

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[\[1\]](#) National Institute of Historic and Artistic Heritage