GUARANI-KAIOWA'S POLITICAL ONTOLOGY:
SINGULAR BECAUSE COMMON

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Abstract:

The article seeks to discuss the political perspective of indigenous peoples in their effort to resist aggression and reclaim back land and opportunities lost to development. The very general and the highly specific condition of indigenous groups in today's market-based globalisation is directly connected with the growing interest of social scientists in the ontological turn, which entails critical interrogations of reductionist assumptions about 'what exists' and novel ways of questioning contested realities. The ontological turn is a re-evaluation of Western-centric conceptualisations of the world and an attempt to move beyond essentialist positions. The flourishing debate on political ontology informs an examination of the tragic socio-spatial experience of the Guarani-Kaiowa of South America, a relatively large indigenous people who had more than 99% of their land grabbed and struggle to resist genocidal pressures and systemic racism. The research investigated how the Guarani-Kaiowa mustered sufficient strength in recent decades to fight a battle that many considered hopeless. Empirical evidences demonstrate that the Guarani-Kaiowa, despite major challenges, have obtained some small, but significant political victories because of coordinated efforts to retain a social and spatial distinctiveness. Crucially, what has made the Guarani-Kaiowa unique is how perceived and charged social differences are mobilised according to the political goals of different groups (indigenous and non-indigenous) and in relation to a spatial setting that is simultaneously lost, desired and anticipated. If the socio-spatial characteristics of the Guarani-Kaiowa were regularly manipulated to render them invisible from a development perspective and to justify the appropriation of indigenous land and other illegal and racist practices by the national state and business sectors, at the same time their own singularisation was their best hope of resistance and the main force that allowed them to continue hoping for a better life and ethnic survival.

POLITICAL ONTOLOGY AS LENS AND MIRROR

The condition and the agency of indigenous peoples in their struggle for survival and meaningful recognition (which also necessarily implies redistribution) expose the intolerance and structural injustices of the contemporary globalised order. It also helps to understand the complex ontological interplay between sameness and difference, beyond simplistic claims about instrumentalised rights and formal inclusion. On the one hand, large sections of the indigenous and non-indigenous world population were left behind by a 'Western modern project' fraught

with antinomies and socio-economic inequalities (Villalba, 2013). On the other, indigenous peoples and ethnic groups – who constitute around 10% of the global population (UN, 2009) – persist in retaining unique characteristics and distinctive attitudes that resist the erasure of social and spatial differences. The interconnections between similar paths of marginalisation and idiosyncratic political experiences on the ground reflect historically given, but highly contested, spatio-political arrangements. For instance, note in the following extracts, which were collected in Guarani-Kaiowa communities in the Brazilian state of Mato Grosso do Sul, the indignation about sustained injustices and assimilation attempts perpetrated over generations and the willingness to reclaim crucial elements of the 'indigenous world'. Note in these accounts the complex interplay between a space that was invaded and dramatically transformed, the sense of being subjected acute forms of discrimination and the determination to reconstruct, in a new socio-spatial configuration, the lived Guarani-Kaiowa space:

"My indigenous name is Tupã Poty Marangatu and my name in Portuguese is xxxxx. In the Yvy Pyte, that is our original story, this is where Ñandejára [a deity] came down and Ñandejára made the indigenous people, and left the land for us, made the land for us, the land is truly ours. The white people came much later to our land, the whites married our women, our sisters, found ways to get married, so the whites are almost our relatives, but they do not like us, why?" [young woman]

"Our ancestors tried to return and thy wanted to return, but then came the message that the area was no longer theirs, it has been given to someone else, so they could not go back. Some tried to return to Ka'aguy Rusu [name of the original homeland of his family], but they could not stay there, their houses had been destroyed and the only option was to move to Dourados [the main indigenous reservation in the south of the state] and then the government came to allocate some land for them [his ancestors] and the result was a tiny area and now it is nothing, so our land is really there. (…) This is what gives us strength to go ahead and achieve something, because if we get hold of at least a small piece [of land], we can live untroubled. (…) Our way of life is different, how things are now does not fit with that (…) so our situation is really serious. In the past the shamans used to take care of people, it was like that, but now everything has changed." [male shaman]

Statements and feelings like the above are common among the Guarani-Kaiowa people, who despite being the second largest indigenous groups in Brazil today (around 45,000 individuals, who maintain close connections with a similar population of the same ethnic group on the other side of the Paraguayan border), have been severely affected by land clearances during the last century and have been forced into an existence increasingly shaped by export-oriented agribusiness, high-speed urbanisation and widespread drug trafficking (Chamorro, 2010; Ioris, 2019a, 2020; Ioris et al., 2019; Melià et al., 1976; Pereira, 2016; Vietta, 2013). There is a clear perception that injustices and prejudices against the indigenous population have

systematically pervaded the action of settlers grabbing land illegally but nonetheless supported and even stimulated by government agencies. In recent decades, the Guarani-Kaiowa have been affected by alarming rates of suicide (it is three times higher than the general population, and among indigenous children it is 18.5 higher when compared with non-indigenous children)[1] and regular killings of their political leaders (almost 300 individuals have been killed in clashes with the police and paramilitary forces [*pistoleiros*] organised by farmers who occupy land grabbed from the indigenous communities).[2] Most cases of armed conflict have been associated with the lengthy homologation of indigenous lands by the government, typically followed by a slow judicial process with endless appeal opportunities that often block the possibility of some minimal restorative justice. Because of considerable political and institutional barriers and their incidental confinement in minuscule plots at the fringes of the large farms, the Guarani-Kaiowa decided to take geography in their hands and, since the 1980s, initiated an organised campaign for the return to areas lost to agribusiness expansion, a very relevant spatio-political and deeply religious-spiritual phenomenon called *retomadas* ('retakings', discussed below).

The point of departure of the present study was the realisation that the reactions of the Guarani-Kaiowa, especially in the last four decades, have relied on a sophisticated understanding of their unique circumstances and also political purpose shared with other subaltern groups (such as urban labourers and landless peasants affected by agribusiness). It corresponds to the words of Varese (1996, 63) that, "although the community may engage in capitalist relations of exchange with the external market, it maintains and internally reproduces noncapitalist relations of production". Wagley and Galvão (1961) rightly add that indigenous groups survive and are likely to continue to resist due to a variety of reasons, but there are specific mechanisms of assimilation and resistance which need to be property investigated. In the same way, there are important and positive intersections between class struggle and racial, national and religious impulses that ought to be properly examined (Saul, 2003). The rich experiences and the perspectives of indigenous peoples are relevant not only because these can provide insights into problems and impacts accumulated in the course of mainstream development, but particularly because the configuration of market-based globalisation is profoundly unjust, exclusionary and ultimately dangerous in many different ways and according to concrete, contingent circumstances. This observation is connected with the growing interest of social scientists in the so-called 'ontological turn' (Strathausen, 2009), that is, the rise of a new critical interrogation of

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[1] O Globo, 26 November 2019, "Suicídio Infantil é 18 Vezes Maior entre Indígenas, Mostra Fiocruz", available at https://oglobo.globo.com/sociedade/suicidio-infantil-18-vezes-maior-entre-indigenas-mostra-fiocruz-24095502 (accessed 21 April 2020).
[2] Private militias, known as *pistoleiros* or 'hired guns' (usually active or retired policemen), are illegally maintained by farmers and their representative associations.

assumptions about what actually exists and ways of questioning a given reality (Blaser, 2013). The ontological turn is basically an opportunity to re-evaluate traditional, Western-centric ideations of the world and an attempt to move beyond functionalist and essentialist positions that still prevail in most academic circles (Biset, 2014; Clément, 2017).

Our aim here, based on empirical results obtained during research among the Guarani-Kaiowa of South America, is to 'put political ontology to work', that is, to question conventional descriptions of complex realities which are neither reducible to schematic, fragmented socio-cultural conceptions nor to abstract, structuralist explanations, and to discuss how their ontological condition influences, and is influenced by, the socio-spatial agency of indigenous groups. It will mobilise empirical evidences, historical data and theoretical points to build an argument on the community-based political economy of reciprocity lived by the Guarani-Kaiowa and that has been under attack from wider socio-economic forces and from internal tensions without going down the route of neo-populism or schematic localisms (challenging both positivistic assumptions and the acute contextualism of relativist approaches). In methodological terms, it entailed the construction of an equitable and productive dialogue with indigenous communities that required, first of all, an ethical and political commitment to stay away from patronising stereotypes and utilitarian oversimplifications. The analysis specifically relied on interviews (48 in total, the majority recorded in the Guarani language and then translated to Portuguese and English), meetings with individuals, groups and communities, analysis of documents and attendance of religious ceremonies and public events during fieldtrips between 2017 and 2020. That allowed to bring together the emotional insights of personal narratives and instances of the cruel geography of exclusion and deprivation.

According to the politico-ontological perspective the underpins this study, indigenous groups react and deal with multiple dilemmas through the process of 'worlding', that is, the production of politicised socio-spatial realities that are part of a performance that defies development and coloniality. Rather than pre-determined entities, world reality (realities) is (are) always open, contested and in the process of being shaped, with a strong political link between existing conditions and potential futures (Mol, 1999). For Stengers (2018, 83), "ontology has many meanings, as does politics." Political ontology both works as an analytical approach and implies a certain political sensibility (Blaser, 2013). Political ontology can, therefore, inform debates about the erosion of representative democracy, increasing consumerism and individualism, the financialisation of life and the unrestricted exploitation of nature, all of which affect both indigenous and non-indigenous groups alike (Esposito, 2019). To be, to become or to reject being indigenous has multiple ontological connotations and repercussions according to

concrete politico-economic and socio-cultural phenomena that connect the local/specific with the global/generalised. In that regard, political ontology can be an insightful lens for uncovering patterns of racism, patriarchy, expropriation and exclusion, but also to reflect back, like a mirror, complex socio-spatial structures and grassroots reactions.

Rather than merely celebrating diversity, ontological politics should connect the lived experiences of indigenous peoples with both the pressures of Western capitalist relations of production and reproduction and the concrete circumstances of symbolic and material marginalisation. Ontological differences and indigenous identities are not static, predetermined features of the social group, but the result of a politicised construction, that is, a socio-spatial trajectory of internal and external relations that are unique. The effort to retain a social and spatial distinctiveness is, essentially, a political statement about the perverse, uneven relations that affect indigenous lives from local to international levels. Our central argument is that what makes indigenous peoples unique is how perceived and charged social differences are mobilised according to the political goals of different groups (indigenous and non-indigenous) and in relation to a spatial setting that is simultaneously lost, desired and anticipated. Indigenous groups raise unique demands because they are seen, and consider themselves, differently on account of idiosyncratic attachments to land, location, memories, symbolic references and particular political conflicts with other social groups (indigenous and non-indigenous). This means that while the indigenous political trajectory is closely connected to the conditions of groups with more convoluted and deterritorialised connections with their ancestral spatial references (such as afro-descendants, Romani, Jews, Tibetans, etc.), it is also distinct and unique (for instance, the Guarani-Kaiowa have been displaced but not removed from the original spatial setting).

It is a form of alterity that has been procured and produced through violent encounters with non-indigenous groups and the multiple survival strategies and relationships indigenous peoples were forced to develop. It derives from a politics of space and time with direct impacts on daily domestic life and also on connections with the world outside the spaces and territories of indigenous groups. As a result of this apparent friction, indigenous groups remain distinctive because of their political action whilst, dialectically, they act because of their distinctiveness as indigenous group. In this context, such groups have had to 'become ever more indigenous' – which in semiotic, material and discursive terms also means 'to be less and less non-indigenous' – in order to oppose or try to manage the antagonistic ramifications of capitalist modernity. In order to fully understand how homogenisation and differentiation effectively co-constitute each other (Sahlins, 1997), we should free ourselves from the Orientalist prejudices of Western mainstream thinking, as well as avoiding the excesses of subaltern studies, in the sense that there

are comparable elements in the relationships between dominant and subordinate groups in both the Global North and the Global South (Chibber, 2013). Binary North-South positions certainly only add more injustice to a long chain of injustices, already extensively denounced by indigenous intellectuals. The Yanomami shaman Davi Kopenawa, in his conversations with the anthropologist Bruce Albert, discloses over more than 500 pages his uneasiness with and rejection of the world he finds himself in. Their dialogue is ontological and also reveals a radical political position, for instance:

> "White people call us ignorant because we are other people than they are. […] We do not want to hear that anymore. *For us, politics is something else*" (Kopenawa and Albert, 2013, 313, emphasis added).

In the case of the Guarani-Kaiowa, their contemporary existence is the result of an extended, mostly silent but well-crafted process of political resistance and cross-community coordination, which means that they have wisely cherished a capacity to act politically and 'occupy the site' as described by Swyngedouw (2014), quite literally, in relation to the areas they have managed to retake. Their land was invaded and grabbed and they have been the target of sustained attacks since colonial times. Asymmetric power relations based on racism and commodification of space pervade their daily life, as well as conditioning their socio-spatial trajectory. Yet, they remain alive and able to actively disrupt the normalised order of things, which reveals a vibrant political agency articulated according to concrete ontological features. Confrontation is now intrinsic to their lives, considering that in order to carry on being indigenous they also need to be seen to be taking the initiative politically. More generally, indigenous peoples have the potential to exert a sizeable influence in the world today because of their ability to define politics in their own terms before they start taking action against hostile groups and the dominant classes, not after. It is actually because action presupposes the political that even groups officially considered non-existent, such as the legendary Charruas in Uruguay, can now reaffirm their identity and heritage as a denunciation of the appalling atrocities perpetrated against their ancestors.[3] The more than 2,000 living Charruas have departed from a condition of extreme politics – in this case, the consequences of genocide – to initiate a difficult struggle for meaningful recognition and historical justice.

Overall, the Guarani-Kaiowa's ontological condition represents an emblematic demonstration of how socio-spatial margins can be confronted and shaped, and of the

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[3] El País, 24 October 2017, "300 Anos Depois, Índios Querem Retomar o Espaço Perdido no Uruguai", available at https://brasil.elpais.com/brasil/2017/10/13/internacional/1507902270_613238.html (accessed 10 January 2018).

intransigence of Brazilian political economic trends, perpetuated by the vicious reaffirmation of patrimonialism, paternalism and militarised logic. Indigenous peoples embody a robust counterpoint to the contradictions and injustices associated with mainstream socio-economic and ideological trends. This is extremely relevant considering that, just as in the years that preceded the First World War, global society in the early 21st century is again on the brink of a serious civilizational crisis caused by national, nutritional and climatic insecurity. In the midst of the risks associated with globalisation, groups with singular trajectories and alternative standpoints possess voices that are worth hearing. The failures of the modernist constitution (Latour, 2004) and the repercussions of the colonial matrix of power (Mignolo, 2011; Quijano, 1998), as much as the positivistic preconceptions of scientists and politicians (Bourdieu, 2004; Coulthard, 2014; Luke, 1990) require close scrutiny, and this can be greatly enhanced with the incorporation of indigenous knowledge. More importantly, because of their creative agency and accumulated knowledge, these groups have developed escape and resistance strategies (with varying levels of success and limited by the aggressive process of assimilation), converting the negative politics of aggression into a positive politics of resistance and anticipation because of the politico-ontological basis of their struggle. Their condition has become inherently politicised and, more importantly, politics has become integral to their survival, as discussed next.

POLITICAL ACTION DUE TO DIVERSITY BUT ALSO COMMONALITY

The Guarani-Kaiowa, like most other indigenous groups around the world, have lived in a perennial tension between a particular condition associated with their ethnicity and heritage on the one hand, and incorporation in the wider circuits of capitalist expansion due to dispossession and proletarianisation on the other. Land grabbing and the exploitation of indigenous labour contrast with collectively accumulated experiences, internal community dynamics and multifaceted individualities. As demonstrated by Chibber (2013), the universalisation of capital is not inconsistent with, but depends on, and even reinforces, ethnic specificities and cultural differences across social groups. Such uneven advance of capitalist relations has been experienced by the Guarani-Kaiowa through a complex interplay between resolute resistance and gradual adaptation to socio-spatial changes. Ongoing violence reproduces, and 'modernises', forms of prejudice and oppression employed during colonisation from the 17th century and the early history of Brazil, following independence from Portugal in 1822, when indigenous peoples were basically treated as exotic relics of an ignoble past that had to be overcome (elements of those conservative ideological claims still arguably circulate through the Brazilian society today). After more than three centuries of intermittent clashes with the colonial enterprise, commercial

demands associated with the Second Industrial Revolution and the geopolitical stability that followed the end of the Paraguayan War (1864-1870) triggered a growing recruitment of indigenous labour. From the last two decades of the 19th century, large-scale harvesting of *erva mate* (scientific name: *Ilex paraguariensis*) was carried out by the transnational corporation Matte Larangeira, making use of a semi-enslaved indigenous labour force (Chamorro 2015; Vietta, 2013).

The denial of their most basic rights during the *erva mate* cycle was concealed through the use of the generic category 'Paraguayan': the local population (mainly Guarani families) could be severely abused as long as they were renamed 'Paraguayans', that is, considered part of the doomed nation who had lost the war and thus lost the right to protest against mistreatment. Consequently, at this stage indigenous workers and families were already easily exploited precisely because their identities were deliberately obfuscated. During the first phase of the positivist Brazilian Republic (after the 1889 military coup), responsibility for indigenous affairs was put mainly in the hands of the army through the Indian Protection Service, established in 1910, which controlled and subjugated the Guarani-Kaiowa people to make space for non-indigenous newcomers (forest extractivists, ranchers and farmers, lumber companies, miners, industrialists, etc.). Due to the militarisation of the frontier region (invoking the excuse of the international border with Paraguay) and the use of aggression as a deliberate public policy, most of the surviving indigenous population was removed and contained in overcrowded, environmentally degraded reservations, whilst others established precarious encampments in isolated locations within large farms [*fundos de fazenda*] or on the narrow strips of public land along the roads. The Brazilian state, whose primary historical mission has been the safeguarding of socio-political institutions that facilitate the joint exploitation of labour and nature, led a powerful and comprehensive reconfiguration of Guarani-Kaiowa identity, life and economy. Individuals were regularly recruited to work on farms and in industry, but held in a condition of conspicuous invisibility and, in practice, became refugees on the land that only a few generations earlier was held entirely by their ancestors. Although indigenous names were used to denominate many towns and locations, the existence of an autonomous Guarani-Kaiowa community was perennially denied and their customs considered out of place, dismissed as primitive and alien.

Agricultural modernisation in the western part of central Brazil was, and continues to be, celebrated as a national achievement, but the original indigenous residents were only accepted if they assumed new, foreign politico-economic identities (labourer/peasant/school student/artisan) or remained unobtrusive on the tiny, oppressive reservations. The encroachment of agrarian capitalism on indigenous territories ultimately reproduced the brutality

of the European conquest, when even the minimal limits formally stipulated by papal and royal decrees were disregarded.[4] The process of attacks on indigenous identities intensified in the 20th century, when successive waves of economic migrants moved to Mato Grosso do Sul to establish ranches and farms in the lands of the Guarani-Kaiowa (as well as those of other indigenous groups also terribly affected by agrarian capitalist development). Almost all their territory was seized through legal and illegal means promoted and supported by the Brazilian state. A triple mechanism of oppression and subjugation, which was associated with ethnicity and the ideology of economic frontiers, was put in place to turn ancestral rights into irrelevance: it combined land grabbing, labour proletarianisation and coordinated, structural racism. The Guarani-Kaiowa were ascribed a social status of aberration and obsolescence that served to justify sustained mistreatment by farmers and authorities in the name of progress and the unity of the national territory. A significant proportion of the population perished and the remaining families were settled in eight small reservations created between 1915 and 1928 in locations arbitrarily chosen by the government near the regional towns (Chamorro and Combès, 2015). Semi-compulsory confinement in reservations that were distant and disconnected from the original indigenous territories was another step in the long process of socio-spatial obliteration.

It is remarkable that, in a region with extensive areas still unused for agricultural production, the government created eight small reservations (around 3,000 hectares each), suggesting that the intention was really to constrain and proletarianise the indigenous population. Trapped on those areas (several of which were later invaded and partly annexed by farmers and public agencies from the surrounding areas), they were forced to practice a foreign, non-indigenous type of subsistence agriculture, or to accept poorly paid work with local farmers, industries or households. Land grabbing and labour commodification accelerated in the second half of the last century with the expansion of export-based agribusiness, leading to the removal of most of the remaining vegetation of Mato Grosso do Sul, destruction of settlements and aggravation of land disputes (Ioris, 2017).[5] In the midst of the Green Revolution and national developmentalism, the institutionalised theft of indigenous land was consolidated as the pillar of an agribusiness-based economy (Ioris, 2019b). The economy and politics of Mato Grosso do Sul[6]

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[4] According to the old 'theory of *indigenato*', indigenous peoples could claim possession rights under classical Roman law. Besides this right to possession (*jus possessionis*), they also held *jus possidendi*, as the legitimacy of this possession was recognised by the Portuguese Crown in 1680, which considered it a congenital right (Demetrio and Kozicki, 2019). The *indigenato* obviously did not prevent the use of extreme violence and the enslavement of many indigenous groups in the colony, particularly the Guarani.

[5] Violence and genocidal practices promoted during the military dictatorship (1964-1985) were courageously denounced by a group of Catholic bishops in a pastoral document published in 1973 entitled "The Indian: One Who Must Die" [*O Índio: Aquele que Deve Morrer*].

[6] The consolidation of a new elite was facilitated by the formation of a new state administration in 1979, following the partition of the larger original State of Mato Grosso.

were increasingly coming under the control of a new regional elite made up mainly of families from the southern Brazilian states, most with German or Italian surnames and claiming to live in a tropical 'Corn Belt' arranged on land seized from the original inhabitants. The long trend of intolerance, exploitation and piecemeal concessions resulted in an explosive situation in which indigenous people were seen as little more than a simulacrum of themselves. It was intolerable for the authorities, landowners and many urban dwellers to accept indigenous individuals and families roving around the region and potentially trying to reclaim their land.[7] Forced off their land and despised by newcomers seeking to turn indigenous assets into private resources, the Guarani-Kaiowa became pariahs in their own birthplaces. Indigenous labour could be paid less because of structural discrimination (for instance, the language barrier and contempt for indigenous culture created a major barrier to accessing public services). Although playing an important socioeconomic role, the 'Indian' adult was legally considered a semi-child, whose 'intellectual incapacity' required tutelage by the state.

Existential tensions particularly affected teenagers and children, increasingly influenced by urban habits and often taunted by their parents and grandparents, but also repeatedly disparaged and ostracised by the wider society in which they wished to be accepted. The existing reservations currently have the highest indigenous population density in the country and are severely deforested and extensively degraded due to encroachment by ranchers and farmers. Sustained and grotesque levels of inequality and discrimination worked to amplify internal community tensions and all sorts of personal dramas, including shocking rates of suicide. While the overall Guarani-Kaiowa population has increased in recent decades (although with extensive malnutrition and food insecurity), many arrived at a desperate existential juncture and decided to take their own lives (Hamlin and Brym, 2006; Machado et al., 2014; Meihy, 1991). Although suicide is a multifaceted phenomenon, particularly considering the complex eschatological elements of Guarani culture and religiosity (such as apocalyptic narratives about the end of the world and the longing for a promised land free from evil), it is statistically undeniable that increasing rates of suicide coincided with the rapid deterioration of life conditions on the reservations and the escalation of violence. In 1981 there were three cases of suicide, but in 1995 there were 55, coinciding exactly with the (illegal) appropriation of indigenous land and its division into private states (CIMI, 2001). Pressure to give up a Guarani-Kaiowa identity became hard to resist, and if there is no chance of being accepted as an indigenous person, some

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[7] During our fieldwork, we learned that even local academics on fieldtrips with students are sometimes arrested by agribusiness farmers, an act of grotesque illegality, but (not surprisingly) tolerated by the local federal university (UFGD) because of the evident subordination of its administration to the hegemony of soybean and sugar-cane production.

individuals may decide that the alternative is to remove themselves from the hostile reality of 'this world'.[8]

Crucially, for the Guarani-Kaiowa the suicide, which is by definition a personal act of great psychological complexity, has also a fundamental social meaning connected with the violent subtraction of their world. In other words, the highly individualised and tragic decision to interrupt one's life is also an expression of the politicised ontological circumstances of communities experiencing the brutal rejection of their socio-spatial demands since the 1980s (it is important to note that the elders categorically affirm that the rate of suicide was negligible before they started to mobilise forces and consistently fight for the return of at least some of the land lost in previous decades). In the words of one of their main spokespersons, the leader Ava Vera Arandu (also known as Tonico Benites who is now a university lecturer) in relation to the wrong information that a group of Guarani-Kaiowa were planning to commit collective suicide if removed from a recently retaken area (called Pyelito Kue or Pueblito Kue, which has the situation unresolved):

> "What they call suicide is in effect a slow death. Many of us have already thought about dying. In our culture, if a family is forced to live in a place where there is no connection, where they do not feel well, life no longer makes sense. The white [non-indigenous] man calls it suicide, for us is a loss of hope." (O Globo, 6 November 2012)

The sense of loss is profound and permeates most of the interaction with other social groups. Multiple forms of racism and intolerance remain widespread in the region, where it is still difficult for many Guarani-Kaiowa to enter town shops or to try to deal with civil servants who do not speak their language, despise their appearance and have little patience with indigenous demands. Some bakeries and supermarkets even keep pre-packed, low quality goods close to entrances to make it easier for indigenous customers to find and discourage them from actually going into the premises (note that, although their presence is considered disagreeable from the perspective of the shop owners and their 'white' clients, the money held by indigenous customers is not rejected; often, the only concrete channel of social interaction is the exchange of money). Resentment about the constant racism and the imposition of social and spatial restrictions based on the indigenous ethnicity are demonstrated below:

> "My native name is Kuña Poty Rendy'i, I am 58, I was raised by my grandfather and my grandmother, and I carry with me all the language they passed on to me when I was a child, which is important for keeping children in harmony with their language. (…) The

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[8] 40% of suicides happen on the Dourados reservation (CIMI, 2001), by far the most overcrowded and impacted by its proximity to a relatively large town.

town is not far from here and it has squeezed us more and more, from all sides; I only go there if there is an invitation, otherwise I never go. When I am in the city I don't like it, I don't feel well, I go there for a short period of time. (…) I am happy here, I can see my plants, my orchard. When I walk in the city, I don't see anything." [female shaman]

"Being in school felt really bad, they used to call me '*bugre*' [a highly offensive term], the non-indigenous students did not like me, but I pretended that I was not listening and I concluded my studies, while many of my colleagues failed. The prejudice was really strong, but they gave up and I did not, I finished it. (...) After school I moved to the indigenous college [FAIND/Teko Arandu programme], got my degree and now I am planning to do another degree, in education, at the regular [non-indigenous] college. And so, I am going." [teacher in an indigenous primary school]

Considering that this bleak situation persists to this day, it is no surprise that most scholars working in the 1950s and 60s, when the Green Revolution was beginning to make its impact, were unable to anticipate that the Guarani-Kaiowa would survive as a cohesive group with a relatively large population that maintains distinctive habits, mythology, religion, language and worldviews. For instance, Schaden (1969) was very pessimistic in relation to the mounting pressure exerted by the non-indigenous world and identified religion and mysticism as the only alternative, although it was thought to be impossible to change the trends of destruction and acculturation. Even the defiance of some charismatic religious leaders at the time (such as the venerated shaman [*ñanderu*] Pa'i Chiquito in the Panambizinho indigenous land, to the north of the city of Dourados) was considered by Schaden as just a form of fruitless escapism. However, defying the fears of many authors, a tenacious fight for survival gradually expanded into a louder political voice and a collective effort to restore, at least in part, what had been lost to development. The 1970s represented a watershed in the history of indigenous mobilisation and coordinated reactions against injustices and abuses, which echoed the parallel movement of peasants, labourers, artists and academics that accelerated the collapse of the military dictatorship (popular mobilisation included the legal functioning of left-wing parties, extended media freedom and emblematic struggle of the landless workers' movement, the MST). This corroborates the suggestion of Castoriadis (1975) that the openness and indeterminism of history derives from the emergence of a radical alterity [*alterité radicale*]. The expression of this radical alterity, moreover, is at the same time shaped by lessons and experiences accumulated over generations and also share commonalities with other social groups in comparable situations of exploitation and aggression. In practice, the Guarani-Kaiowa have been incorporated in the circuits of capital accumulation and labour exploitation, but they have also managed to mobilise perceived and attributed ontological differences in a long struggle for recognition and compensation.

Their political action vividly reflects the specific basis of their claims and the strategies and initiatives common to the social movement repertoire, in other words, the ethnic identity of the Guarani-Kaiowa has important synergies with their class condition. For instance, since the late 1970s, regular assemblies of the Guarani and Kaiowa communities (called *Aty Guassu*) have been held to bring together members and leaders of different indigenous collectives to decide on the next political moves, as well as to foster interaction with non-indigenous allies and the wider indigenous community (increasingly making use of internet-based social media). In more recent years, with the political prominence and moral authority of the *Aty Guassu*, parallel assemblies have been organised by female leaders (*Kuñangue Aty Guassu*, the Great Assembly of Guarani and Kaiowa Women), young members of the communities (RAJ or the Guarani and Kaiowa Youth Movement) and the shamans (*Aty Jeroky Guassu*, the General Assembly of Guarani and Kaiowa Shamans). The best demonstration of the connection between Guarani-Kaiowa identity and their socio-spatial demands, informed by such meetings and by the growing realisation of their politico-ontological condition, is the process of *retomada* (retaking), whose genesis is both the long legacy of abuses and exploitation and the emerging political activism constructed by indigenous peoples in Brazil in the wider context of democratic struggle and the fight for basic rights. The *retomadas* have an important precedent in the continuous struggles of the Kaiowa against the combined oppression of state, Christian churches and farmers, even when harsh punishment and even death were almost inevitable. The general feeling was demonstrated by chief Amilton Lopes, leader of the Pirakuá community:

> "Nobody asked permission to take our land, we are not going to ask permission to recover our land" (CIMI, 2001, 47).

Tired of repeated evictions and structural racism, the Guarani-Kaiowa have undertaken a resolute campaign to retain or reclaim the opportunities systematically denied to them by the state and society alike. In that regard, the Guarani-Kaiowa share the same experience of other indigenous groups in Brazil and South America, which have developed new spatial strategies based on accumulated experiences and lessons learned over many years of engagement with farmers and other non-indigenous groups. Note the following interview extract collected during the present research:

> "I am xxxxxxx and my traditional name is Tupã Guassu, my old name."

> Interviewer: - How old are you?

"People estimate that I am 70 or 80 years old, but I should be older, the information faded in the previous document, the ink was old, so they produced a new document and put 70 there. (...) When I was this big, my father told me: 'I am not going to leave, this is all ours, the land, the forest, we can't leave'. (…) Several people had left, many relatives, because they were afraid, only a small number resisted. They were afraid and fled. But my father said: 'I am not going, we have to die here'; later came an authority from Rio de Janeiro and agreed to recognise their right to the land. We got the land title, but the group that resisted was small, maybe 15 people, we were there. No white colonist was around yet, at that point. (…) Before my father, who was the chief, died, he told me to endure, to say here in order to maintain our settlement. He told me to talk to the government, to work hard, and to accept support from the others. And so I did. I resisted and we retained our land. (...) If we pray, our creator will help us and also give you a good life [*tekoporã*], wisdom, so you can live well, if you plant some seeds of white maize, manioc stems, then God will help you too."

Through the *retomadas* the Guarani-Kaiowa have tried to take legislation into their own hands and have pushed for the enforcement of Article 231 of the Brazilian Constitution, which determines that ancestral indigenous rights take precedence over other land claims (with no compensation for those who invaded indigenous areas). The *retomada* is an autonomous action (carefully planned and secretly agreed by indigenous collectives according to their own preferences) that typically starts with a complex, incremental negotiation within the community and building a collective will to act. When a particular community, with support from relatives and friends living elsewhere, decides to proceed with the reoccupation of a lost *tekohá* – an important Guarani concept that refers to the land held and used by an extended family (clan) or community (several families) – they will march towards their land, set up encampments and try to resist (making use of intense religious rituals and associated symbolisms) the inevitable reaction of the police and of the farmers occupying their land. The land retaking strategy is intensely discussed during the *Aty Guassu* and in other meetings, when the families directly involved in the specific *retomada* receive support and guidance from other allied communities. The preparation involves great risks and the activities need to be carefully managed. The core group that is going to take part in the reoccupation is then selected and includes religious people (the leaders), their assistants, political chiefs, elders and children. The forerunners spend months preparing themselves for the *retomada*, praying with great ardency and taking part in strenuous religious rituals overseen by the shamans. The four nights before the retomada are of even more intense religiosity, when the warriors receive a sort of baptism or blessing that is required for them to be recognised and accepted in advance by the dead ancestors and to be protected against evil spirits. The night before the *retomada*, faces and body parts are ritualistically painted and then the male warriors hold their bows and arrows tightly as a sign of respect for the ancestors. After this long preparation, they march for several kilometres during the night to collectively retake the

land, a moment of great excitement, deep emotions and life threatening perils (it is common that a few participants die and many others are hurt in the clashes with farmers, *pistoleiros* and the regular police). If the initiative is successful and they succeed in remaining in the area (due to a favourable provisional court decision, which is the exception rather than the norm), the families who returned to their ancestral land [*tekohá*] immediately set up a religious altar, build huts and start to fish and hunt to feed the group. See the following statement by a man, 50 years old, involved in the *retomada* Pyelito Kue:

> "I was born here but when I was 4 or 5, my parents moved to Sassoró, where I grew up, met my wife, got married and raised my family there, where it was first called 'ramada' and it now Sassoró. Well! Then I joined the *retomada*, to 'resurface' in our village, as it is said in our indigenous language, to have the chance to use our land again, we returned to this area in 2009, nine years ago. (…) Since I became involved in the fight and I never gave up, because for me it was so important that we returned to our original places. We know where the cemetery of our ancestors is, our grandfathers, the people who came before us. I remembered the branches that formed our old house. The waterfall, and other sites, I know everything about this place, there were so many trees and they used it to build *sapé* [thatched] houses, which were abandoned and destroyed by the farmers. There is a site called Mbokajay, with tall palm trees, which identified the traditional settlement and the farmers cut down to eliminate the evidences of indigenous presence. (…) But we take our land back because we know that this is the land of our people.

In this interview extract it is possible to see the interplay between personal memories and collective action, as much as a space that is both remembered, dreamed and contested. Despite many setbacks, the Guarani-Kaiowa have accumulated sufficient strength to try to retake significantly larger areas than in previous decades (areas with thousands of hectares are now more often targeted) and to claim rights over an even greater territory [*tekohá guassu* or *tekoharã*] that resembles the large pre-colonisation indigenous space (Barbosa and Mura, 2011). It is evident that conflict is ontologically unavoidable, given that agribusiness-based development cannot exist without productive land stolen from indigenous groups and the Kaiowa cannot exist 'qua-Kaiowa' without a meaningful connection to their land. There have been repeated violent clashes between indigenous groups, the police apparatus and private militias. For instance, the so-called 'massacre of Caarapó', in 2016, in which one indigenous young man was killed, six others were injured and three policemen were also hurt, was related to the demarcation of the indigenous land Dourados-Amambaipeguá (this highly volatile dispute remains unsettled, and additional skirmishes were recorded in the following years). Both sides want the same territory, but the action of the indigenous groups represents a direct obstacle to mainstream regional development. This is why the *retomadas* have been ferociously attacked by conservative political

groups, particularly the multi-party agribusiness lobby, the largest and better coordinated pressure group within the national congress. Additionally, Brazilian landowners can always count on the overt sympathy of local politicians, judges (many of whom are landowners themselves) and the police. For example, in a ruling by the Supreme Court (STF) in Brasília on 16 September 2014 about the indigenous area Guyraroká, to the south of Dourados, the constitutional principle of the prior and inalienable rights of the indigenous groups to their ancestral lands was absurdly relativized: Justice Mendes, a recognised ally of agribusiness and latifundists (himself a wealthy businessman, farmer and senior member of the supreme court), explicitly criticised the acknowledgement of these fundamental rights, detrimental to the interests of "highly productive agribusiness farmers" in Mato Grosso do Sul, and alleged that, following this logic, the whole country would be "returned to the Indians", including Copacabana beach. It is clear that without the indigenous reaction the terms of regional development would always be dictated by those in power, and existing hierarchies would continue unchallenged.

All this demonstrates an enduring politics of resistance in the present and anticipation of a better future that results from indigenous people's ontological condition as distinctive groups, as much as from the convergence with other grassroots movements during the (incomplete and turbulent) process of redemocratisation of Brazil since the end of the 1970s. Subaltern groups – land and rural workers, peasants, other minorities, indigenous peoples, etc. – engage in intersecting but distinctive power-laden struggles because each brings into being ontological politics related to unique socio-spatial experiences. Dissimilarities do not relate merely to the fact that these groups have differences in location, culture and language but also derive from contrasting, deeply politicised socio-spatial expectations and demands. If identities are multiple and the self is decentred, dislocated selves "are not endlessly fragmented but constituted in relation to biography, history, culture and, most importantly, place" (Radcliffe and Westwood, 1996, 2). The ability and determination of the Guarani-Kaiowa to respond seems to be located precisely in the deployment of assumed and imputed differences – comprising elements of land-based knowledge, religion, language, cosmology and ethnicity – in an attempt to maintain and expand attachments to a social space that is simultaneously lost, sensed and yearned for. The elements of Guarani-Kaiowa ontology are particularly connected with their fight to be and to become ever more indigenous, which can only be fulfilled in relation to a spatial setting that includes what was lost and can be restored. Despite all the genocidal and ecocidal pressures of development, the Guarani-Kaiowa communities managed to survive, expand and enter the new century with a stronger indigenous identity, a widely spoken language (Guarani), positive demographic trends, coordinated efforts to secure government concessions and, most

importantly, a coherent fight for the recovery of areas illegally appropriated by the national state and private businesses.[9] They have to fight because they are the fight, in other words, without their land-based struggle they become less and less themselves.

SINGULAR BECAUSE COMMON

The Guarani-Kaiowa's existence has been marked by simultaneous processes of socio-spatial subtraction and politico-strategic reaction, which have acquired great ontological complexity. Indigenous communities have been living on a knife-edge between a bygone past, a degrading present and the potentiality of the future. Once removed from the material, symbolic and spiritual elements of their ancestral space, the Guarani-Kaiowa are converted into irremediably displaced people, yearning to return. For the indigenous groups who experienced first-hand the process of displacement or are the immediate descendants of those who were expelled from their land in the recent past, the scale of the struggle cannot be measured in simple material terms. This is obviously not an irrational feeling, but rather an existential condition transmitted, in different ways, to the new generations. Although the *retomada*, by definition, is the return to the original places from which the older generations were expelled several decades ago (many still alive and able to testify to their connection with the places in question), it is also an intense site of spatiogenesis where traditions, new influences and articulation with other sites and other groups converge to create and consolidate the newly reoccupied area. This makes the land-based struggle also, and primarily, an inward journey to recover the outward world that was brutally misappropriated. It is a condition that refutes any para-Cartesian argument such as 'I fight, therefore I exist' or 'I exist, therefore I fight'; in reality, the indigenous identity and distinctive existence both derive from a dialectical ontological position that can be described as: 'I am because I fight and fight in order to continue to exist'.

Despite their resistance to genocidal pressures and some (partial, but meaningful) land recovery victories, we are just beginning to learn about the ontological basis of the Guarani-Kaiowa's political ability to dismantle processes of dispossession, acculturation and socio-spatial control. It was argued above that this question can only be properly understood by considering what makes indigenous groups unique and which other ontological attributes intersect with identity-based boundaries. To be and to remain Guarani-Kaiowa is to be able to mobilise what is distinctive in the experiences, practices and strategies of this group in relation to spatial

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[9] The political weight of such autonomous indigenous mobilisation over recent decades has certainly not been ignored by the far right-wing government elected in 2018: the very first acts of the Bolsonaro administration were to suspend the demarcation of any disputed land, encourage farmers, miners and loggers to invade reservations and, if necessary, attack indigenous populations, and put the historical enemies of the Guarani-Kaiowa people (including lawyers, politicians and landowners) in charge of the Ministry of Agriculture.

imaginaries and concrete social relations. Kusch (2010) pertinently describes the indigenous condition in South America as the tension between a modern developmental society that forces indigenous people to be [*ser*] part of a market-based society and linear thought, whilst their own society is actually based on different relations, contrasting knowledges and a pattern of coexistence (the paradigm of *estar* and *estar siendo*). Consequently, indigenous groups today, in different and individualised ways, occupy an in-between ontological status and are typically relegated to socio-spatial frontiers (Ioris, 2018). This is an inevitably tense arrangement, given that indigenous lands and labour represent lucrative opportunities for the expansion of capitalist exploitation, but at the same time indigenous peoples' endeavours to survive subvert the presumed, pre-ordained logic of capital accumulation. If the proletariat is the main source of surplus value, indigenous groups are a proletariat, or even peasantry, in their potential to be, or in already being, somehow over-exploited, as well as possessing idiosyncratic features beyond conventional class-based accounts.

In that regard, the growing interest in ontology has the dual purpose of unpacking the politics involved in the practices that shape the world, and helping to explain clashes, interactions and the mingling of different world formations (e.g. modern vs. non-modern), and how indigenous peoples strive to sustain their own existence (Blaser, 2009). Ontological reflections help to make sense of the politics that gives meaning to action, as well as the conflicts and mediations that take place when conflicting ontologies struggle for intelligibility (Serna, 2017). The ontological turn in the social sciences also provides an insightful heuristic tool to appreciate the criticism of modern ideological constructions raised by indigenous groups (Blaser, 2013), although the potential for this criticism to unsettle dominant positions is typically contained by conventional theorisations of ontology (Hunt, 2014). Politico-ontological analyses can, therefore, be put to work to demonstrate the flawed relativism of cultural studies (often too focused on the internal features of cultures rather than on political trajectories and inter-group relations) and the perversity of modernising approaches which neglect socio-spatial differences in their rationale for development priorities (e.g. the economic agenda of the disgraced former vice-president of Bolivia, Alvaro Linera). These questions demand concrete intellectual and practical commitments, considering that "the problem with ontology is not knowledge or representation, but engagement with and for a world" (Stengers, 2018, 85).

The ontological thinking of Alain Badiou provides an invaluable contribution for dealing with such social specificities and shared generalities. One of Badiou's main politico-ontological claims is that being is a multiplicity, but that this existential multiplicity is not merely a series of ones or unities [*l'un n'est pas*]; rather, being-qua-being is a multiple of multiples (Badiou, 1988;

2006). Connections between the specific and the universal disrupt both the rigid, structuralist interpretation of the world and the fragmented, existentialist frame of reference that privileges an exceptionalist ontology. The implications of the elaboration put forward by Badiou are not trivial but greatly enrich the debate on the recognition of fundamental rights and the political agency of indigenous peoples. Key to the argument put forward by Badiou is the universalisation of singularities through the pursuit of truths, which for their part constitute a multiplicity predicated on the consequences of disruptive events. Indigenous peoples, just like other groups subordinated to relations of production and exclusion, are not better or more creative per se, but their positionality in relation to those processes of hierarchisation is what brings them together and creates the possibility for radical rupture. The condition of groups like the Guarani-Kaiowa is obviously not a direct product of capitalism, but their need and ability to react have been forged in long and deeply violent processes of differentiation and subordination that put them in the same sphere of class-struggle as other subordinate groups. The subjectification of the indigenous person thus depends on proper determination of the interplay between a common human condition and a unique association with other groups and classes. This ontological tension can only be resolved through 'truth procedures' emerging from a 'faithful subjectivity' grounded in transformative events (such as the *retomadas*). In that sense, truth ethics is an encounter between philosophy and life that articulates the finite conditions of individuals with the infinite dimension of the whole process of truth (Badiou, 2015) and, likewise, the ethics of truth events entails the disruption and reconfiguration of an established order because of the disruptive force of the event. The event (shaped by practices and struggles) constitutes the truth of being in a situation, and it is also through events that being can be ruptured (events that violate the order of being and transgress or transform the laws of being). The truth is a unified multiplicity that contains not merely a critique of the reigning present, but also holds alternatives to the present within the present itself (Hallward, 2003).

The ontology of Badiou can be pushed a step further to specifically embrace the lived geography and the truth procedures of spatial relations of resistance by indigenous peoples. Acts of resistance are mobilised through specific spaces and times, geographies make resistance as much as "resistance uses extant geographies and makes new geographies" (Pile, 1997, 2). Being is not resistance in itself, but being as multiplicity in the world conditioned by events can lead to the subversion of a given socio-spatial order. The spatial singularity of the individual is crucial for the possibility of political resistance and transformative action, something that indigenous groups have repeatedly demonstrated. The spatiality of domination (as in the case of agribusiness and regional development) cannot encompass everything, but resistance happens through the

creation of alternative spatialities. Power relations are unstable and events may cause them to rupture. The emancipation of the singular amid the oppressive universality of capitalism starts with the strengthening of singularities and awareness of how they function in the contemporary universal world. Indigenous groups are clearly and unmistakably oppressed, often have their land and livelihoods taken from them, and undergo genocidal practices (including epistemicide and ecocide). Their anguish is real and cannot be relativized. But in addition to this, their existence in relation to a particular territory, their unique practices and their ability to survive and mobilise culture in different socio-spatial circumstances indicate that there is much more than desperate human survival involved. The ontological foundation of indigenous groups is not simply a reaction to brutal clashes and prolonged periods of 'slow violence'; rather, it contains unique forms of knowledge, technology and resistance that cannot be reduced to linear binaries between left and right, modern and antimodern, Western and non-Western, etc. (Blaser, 2010). This is because indigenous ontology simultaneously transgresses the linear sequence of time, the impoverished composition of the material world (void of the spiritual but pervaded by emerging commodity fetishes) and the limited space for political debate in mainstream circuits (normally circumscribed today by questions of state financial resources, with almost no consideration of a range of more fundamental demands and freedoms).

It can be concluded that the politicised ontology of indigenous groups such as the Guarani-Kaiowa is constantly produced by ontologised politics. The above discussion has presented the defiant political struggle of the Guarani-Kaiowa, a group that is desperately trying to resist and overcome genocidal pressures associated with agribusiness-based development, using this experience to provide a heuristic account of the importance of political ontology as a tool for interrogating the impacts of Western modernity and its socio-spatial legacy. The Guarani-Kaiowa had to be partially assimilated and their social institutions severely undermined so that they could be exploited through depersonalised market-based relations. Socio-spatial differences were manipulated to render them invisible from a development perspective and to justify the appropriation of indigenous land and other illegal and racist practices by the state and business sector. At the same time, the Guarani-Kaiowa's own singularisation is their best hope of resistance and the main force that allows them to continue hoping for a better life under a different world order. Because of all this, the non-essentialist ontological politics of indigenous groups brings them to the centre of the contemporary political debate and the search for alternatives to the maelstrom of modernity. In addition, the trajectory of indigenous groups exposes the intricate dialectics of specific and general conditions. Homogenising modernity affects and transforms socio-spatial realities, but never in a totalising fashion.

The struggle to restore the Guarani-Kaiowa world can be interpreted as the manifestation of a singular universality [*universalité singulière*], as suggested by Badiou. The unique elements of the group's politico-spatial trajectory are predicated in more general forms of opposition and critique from other subaltern groups around the world. Capitalist development employs a syntax of control and exploitation based on the universalisation of what is singular, as in the case of the opening of economic frontiers, where socio-ecological diversity is reduced to the singularity of exchange values and the language of markets. In diametric contrast, the socio-spatial logic of the *retomadas* is to singularise the experience of consciousness, mobilisation and action. In other words, land grabbing homogenises in the form of private property the unique features of non-Western groups, whilst the *retomadas* particularise land struggles through the singularisation of culturally meaningful spaces. The general-totalising and the specific-antagonistic do not remain separate, but combine in dynamic ways, that is, the singular is ever more singular the more general it can be. In that sense, the role and agency of indigenous peoples is not a curiosity of contemporary capitalism, a residue of other 'more important' political disputes, but central to understanding and overcoming processes that the majority of the global population suffers from and longs to eliminate.

Finally, the powerful movement to return and rebuild their ancient, ancestral places makes the Guarani-Kaiowa experience extremely emblematic and at the same time a vital component of the much wider effort to decolonise society and the economy in Brazil. Local and national authorities consider the indigenous campaign to recover lost areas as something archaic or 'modern-deficient', while in fact their action reveals the ontological tensions between indigenous demands for just compensation and the intolerance of advancing modernisation (the 'machine' that recognises no world, as critiqued by Stengers, 2018). What is commonly described as globalisation or contemporary capitalism is the result of place-specific and historically situated combinations of hegemonic, alienating market-based forces experienced and resisted by individuals and their social networks through concrete opportunities they create for themselves according to their own socio-spatial trajectory. It is only right and proper to conclude this analysis with the inspirational ontological ideas of the most important Guarani scholar of recent generations, the late anthropologist and catholic priest Bartomeu Melià:

> "In continuing to be what they are, in speaking their language, in living with great strength the philosophy of the word and the theology of the inspired word, there is a force that has given them good results. The Guarani continue to be modern in the sense that they announce new ways of life. How long can they continue to be merely memories of the future?" (Melià, 2004, 161).

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