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Citation for final published version:

Ioris, Antonio Augusto Rossotto 2020. Ontological politics and the struggle for the Guarani-Kaiowa world. *Space and Polity* 24 (3) , pp. 382-400. 10.1080/13562576.2020.1814727

Publishers page: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13562576.2020.1814727>

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# ONTOLOGICAL POLITICS AND THE STRUGGLE FOR THE GUARANI-KAIOWA WORLD

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*“En guaraní callan, ahora, los muertos.”*

Eduardo Galeano, in *Memoria del Fuego 2: Las Caras y las Máscaras*

*Abstract.* Indigenous politics is crucial for rethinking some of the most serious contemporary dilemmas, as in the case of pressing discussions of development, democracy and justice. Those debates are particularly poignant today given the mounting disruptive interventions committed in the name of economic growth and resource management. The article examines the political perspective of Indigenous peoples in their effort to resist aggression and reclaim back land and opportunities lost to development. The discussion is based on an investigation into how the Guarani-Kaiowa of South America have been able to maintain a socio-spatial identity, react to specific socio-spatial injustices and at the same time associate their struggle with the campaign of other subaltern groups. This concrete example is instrumental for demonstrating the application of political ontology as a tool for interrogating the impacts of Western modernity and the advance of agrarian capitalism. Results suggest that, on the one hand, it is important to account for the political ontology of Indigenous peoples beyond generic categorisations that end up perpetuating abstract descriptors divested of protagonism and initiative. On the other, the idiosyncrasies of each individual experience also share commonalities with other socio-economic trajectories and related processes of control and exploitation.

## HEURISTIC ONTOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES TO INDIGENOUS POLITICS

Indigenous politics is crucial for rethinking some of the most serious contemporary dilemmas, as in the case of pressing discussions of development, democracy and justice. Those debates are particularly poignant today given the mounting disruptive interventions committed in the name of economic growth and resource management. Likewise, the struggle of Indigenous peoples for survival and meaningful recognition exposes the difficulties faced by those impacted by market-based globalisation and suffering from sustained processes of expropriation and dispossession (Nichols 2020). Long established asymmetries and injustices are exacerbated in moments of acute crises, as in the case of anthropogenic climate change and during the Covid-19

outbreak in 2020. Critical investigations of those trends need to go further than the conventional categorisations of culture or reductionist interpretations of socio-spatial relations, but call for a reflexive examination of unacknowledged, and so far largely unchallenged, assumptions behind methodological and analytical approaches. The collective scrutiny of the positivistic preconceptions of mainstream scientists and politicians (Bourdieu, 2004; Coulthard, 2014), as much as the colonial matrix of power (Mignolo, 2011; Quijano, 1998) and the persistence of genocidal practices in the contemporary world (Moses, 2008), can be greatly enhanced with the incorporation of Indigenous wisdom and knowledge. The perspectives of Indigenous peoples are important not only because these can provide insights into problems and instabilities accumulated in the course of mainstream development, but because of the huge debt ‘to be paid back’ (most of this ‘payment’ is obviously rhetorical, given that a lot has been irreversibly lost) and their active role in today’s political landscape.

Important progress has been made in recent years regarding the capture of social and spatial understanding by different social groups, considering that these not only encompass contrasting subjectivities but reflect different worlds of equal validity. This ongoing interpretative shift, which is part of the strive for justice and equal rights, is normally described as the ‘ontological turn’, which has entailed, particularly in Brazil, France and the United Kingdom, a radical review of Eurocentric, structuralist conceptualisations in favour of unfinished, open-ended accounts of the material and more-than-material dimensions of the lived and contested realities. To a large extent, the ontological turn is a critique of the ordinary understanding of ‘culture’, which is considered too rigid and rather metaphysical, as long as it generally implies that it is only ideas and viewpoints that change, but objects and materials stay unchangeable (in other words, culture may differ, but nature and matter do not). Notwithstanding the growing recognition of the interface between culture and politics pervading the production of social relations and forms of collective contestation (Alvarez et al., 1998), culture “is an inadequate concept for dealing with difference not only because it is thin but because it takes for granted its own ontological status” (Blaser, 2013, 550). Some excesses of the turn to the ontological, moreover, need to be addressed, especially when it diverts attention from the “actually existing politics of nature and culture” and the reification of “the wreckage of various histories as the forms of the philosophic present” (Bessire and Bond, 2014, 449). Likewise, more work needs to be done by those dealing with political ontology in order to move beyond locked-in concepts and instigate an engaged questioning of the socio-spatial reality (Joronen and Häkli, 2017). Ontology should be positioned as a heuristic device to rethink the analytical perspectives normally used by social scientists (around notions of ‘culture’) and, more importantly, to make

clear the politicised repercussions of scientific work and the responsibilities of academia and intellectuals in tackling injustices that still hold back Indigenous peoples. The ontological turn acquires, thus, a deep political meaning and yields a political ontology perspective that can particularly assist with connecting the lived experiences of Indigenous peoples both with the wider pressures of Western capitalist relations of production and with the local circumstances of social exclusion and material marginalisation. As claimed by Hall (1985) the articulations of race and class are contingent, but not arbitrary and reveal the potential for political rupture.

Political ontology then becomes an insightful lens, for example, to uncover patterns of racism, patriarchy, expropriation and exclusion, but also to reflect back, like a mirror, complex socio-spatial relations and grassroots reactions. It can ultimately help to challenge colonialist patterns of knowledge-making and plays an important role in the production of just and more inclusive realities. Taking that into account, the objective of this article is to mobilise political ontology to critically reflect on the trajectory and the present-day condition of the Guarani-Kaiowa, a South American Indigenous group that has been seriously disrupted by economic pressures, racist violence and governmental negligence. The Guarani-Kaiowa population, which lives on both sides of the border between Brazil and Paraguay, has been impacted by colonisation, resource extraction and the intensification of agrarian capitalism, especially since the middle of the last century, when successive waves of economic migrants moved to the Brazilian state of Mato Grosso do Sul (Melià et al., 1976; Pereira, 2016). The Guarani-Kaiowa were ascribed by Brazilian society and government a status of discrimination that has served to conceal sustained violence from farmers and authorities on behalf of progress and national sovereignty (Ioris et al., 2019). Almost all their territory was seized through legal and illegal means, especially land grabbing carried out by public agencies and private landowners (Chamorro, 2010, 2015; Ioris, 2019a, 2020). After the annihilation of a significant proportion of the pre-colonisation population and significant disorganisation of social institutions, the remaining families on the Brazilian side were settled in eight small reservations created between 1915 and 1928 in areas that were administratively chosen near the main urban centres and that had no particular historical importance for the Guarani-Kaiowa. The almost compulsory confinement in these sites, which were distant and disconnected from the original family territories, was another step in the long process of socio-spatial oppression.

The eight reservations currently have one of the highest Indigenous demographic density in Brazil and have been extensively degraded due to the relentless encroachment by ranchers and farmers. The level of unemployment among the Guarani-Kaiowa is alarmingly high and the general perception in the communities, as explained by many interviewed during this research, is

that the problem is far more than economic, but a direct consequence of widespread racism and prejudice. When jobs become available for Indigenous workers, these are often poorly paid, intermittent tasks in agribusiness farms, industries or households (sometimes in distant locations or even in other states where there is demand for temporary workers during the harvest season). The following statement gives an idea of the situation in the reservations:

*“When I was a child, it was not like that, there was no tension or disagreement then. Now things are really different. When I was young, we just knew how to work; when it was dawn, my father took the other men to cultivate the farm plot. I used to stay with my mother until noon, then we took food and joined them in the work. We only thought about work, but it is no longer like that. Now there are many foreign people in our land and who bring problems to the community. (...) Also the farmers come and destroy everything around [our land], we just have a bit of woodland left.”* [woman, Indigenous name Kunha Uruku, 53 years, Pirajuí reservation, municipality of Paranhos]

Grotesque levels of inequality and discrimination have tragically amplified community tensions and all sorts of personal dramas, including disturbing rates of adolescent and child suicide. While the overall Guarani-Kaiowa population has increased in recent decades (although with extensive malnutrition and widespread food insecurity), many arrived at a desperate existential juncture and decided to take their own lives, especially teenagers and young adults (Hamlin and Brym, 2006; Machado et al., 2014; Meihy, 1991). However, the evidently difficult situation faced of the Guarani-Kaiowa not only tells a great deal about the injustices committed in the context of regional development, but also the failure of most studies to explain the deep, interconnected causes of land-based clashes and interethnic tensions. Instead of the mere denunciation of problems and abuses, what is required is a careful consideration of the ontological basis of socio-spatial disputes and the political agency of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous groups (beyond the Manichean division between good and evil, ‘active perpetrators’ and ‘passive victims’). Ontology is important because, alongside the recurrent attacks on individuals and communities, it is the Guarani-Kaiowa world itself that has been systematically rejected and its existence considered a nuisance to other social groups. Although Indigenous names are widely used to denominate places or objects in Mato Grosso do Sul, the presence of Guarani-Kaiowa people is constantly repudiated by most non-Indigenous society and their customs considered out of place, dismissed as primitive, excessive and foreign. In the words of a female religious leader who lives in the overcrowded Dourados reservation, “the city is too close and it suffocates us, from all sides it squeezes us; when I have to go there I want to return on the

same day. I normally only go when I have to, in any direction [I travel] it is too close to the city” (interview, 2018).

Nevertheless, and in spite of all the negative pressures, their Indigenous world continues to exist, and it is constantly reconstructed and creatively adapted to new circumstances. There has been a perennial making and remaking of the Guarani-Kaiowa socio-space in tandem with the simultaneous contestation of the unfair socio-spatial trends. In that regard, political ontology can be of great value to explore such complex historico-spatial processes and to investigate the specific mechanisms of assimilation and resistance amidst widespread dispossession and exploitation trends. This evidently requires an open dialogue with the Guarani-Kaiowa communities based on an ethical and methodological commitment of the researcher away from stereotypes and oversimplifications. It should be more than knowledge co-production, but a genuine engagement in Indigenous coping strategies and their political empowerment. The present analysis relies on 48 interviews (most done in the Guarani language, with the help of a research assistant, and then translated to Portuguese and English), systematic meetings with individuals, groups and communities (justified because crucial information is also conveyed through social intercourse, rituals and practices), examination of documents and attendance of religious ceremonies and public events during fieldtrips between 2017 and 2020. The research was planned and conducted following a constant reflection on the moral, political and social responsibilities of non-Indigenous investigators when dealing with sensitive and highly contested ontological issues. For instance, how to properly capture and adequately record the indignation of leaders and community members about sustained injustices perpetrated over generations and that continue to pervade their daily lives.

The discussion in the following pages is also closely associated with the move to decolonise social sciences by centring Indigenous ontologies, naming lived realities which are not accounted for in dominant discourses of violence and colonialism (Holmes et al., 2015) and recognising that the shadows of colonial oppression are always ‘there’ and still present in everyday forms of marginalisation (Clement, 2019). As examined in the next section, the evolution of the Guarani-Kaiowa struggle and their ontological experience of being a unique Indigenous people contain elements of socio-spatial injustices that are nonetheless shared with the class-ethnicity nexus of other subaltern groups around the world and which also helps to produce the world.

## **GUARANI-KAIOWA’S ONTOLOGISED POLITICS**

Tensions involving the Guarani-Kaiowa geography are not something recent but have marked their socio-spatiality for many generations. The advance of colonisation and agrarian capitalism has actually imbricated the Guarani-Kaiowa society in a new politico-economic reality imposed by the national state and a number of powerful players. In addition, ethnic-related violence has also triggered multiple manifestations of resistance and entailed gradual, normally painful, adaptations to change that defiantly preserved central features of the Indigenous world. Chibber (2013) already observed that the universalisation of capital is not inconsistent with, but depends on, and even reinforces, ethnic specificities and cultural differences across social groups. After intermittent clashes with the colonial enterprise since the early seventeenth century, commercial demands associated with the Second Industrial Revolution and the geopolitical stability that followed the end of the Paraguayan War (1864-1870) intensified the recruitment of Indigenous workers in the region (Chamorro, 2015). From the last two decades of the nineteenth century, the large-scale operation associated with the harvesting and processing of *erva mate* leaves (*Ilex paraguariensis*) was carried out by a handful of transnational corporations, such as Matte Larangeira, making use of a semi-enslaved Indigenous labour force (Vietta, 2013). The denial of their most basic labour rights was concealed through the use of the generic category 'Paraguayan,' that is, the local population (mainly Guarani families) could be crudely exploited as long as they were renamed 'Paraguayans' and considered part of the doomed neighbouring nation who had been defeated in the long war and, thus, as effectively having lost the prerogative to protest.

In the early decades of the Brazilian Republic (founded in 1889 after seven decades of monarchic rule), the responsibility for Indigenous affairs was put in the hands of the army through the brutal and corrupt intervention of the Indian Protection Service (SPI, later renamed as FUNAI) that had been established in 1910 (Guzmán, 2010). During most of the twentieth century, the Brazilian state, whose primary historical mission has always been the safeguarding of socio-political institutions that facilitate the joint exploitation of labour and nature primarily benefiting regional and national elites, promoted a powerful and comprehensive reconfiguration of Guarani-Kaiowa social life and community-based economy. Individuals continue to be regularly recruited to work on farms and in agro-industries, but held in a condition of conspicuous invisibility and, in practice, became refugees on lands that only a few generations earlier were held by their ancestors. Land grabbing and labour commodification accelerated in the second half of the twentieth century with the expansion of export-based agribusiness, leading to the removal of most of the remaining vegetation and aggravation of land disputes (Ioris, 2017). It was a context strongly influenced by national developmentalism and the repercussions

of the international Green Revolution (Ioris, 2019b), a complex process that at the local level, in the southern section Mato Grosso do Sul, hinged on the expropriation of areas that, according to the legislation since colonial times, were destined to support the original Indigenous groups. Most of the surviving Indigenous population was removed and contained in the overcrowded, environmentally degraded reservations (mentioned above), whilst others formed precarious encampments in isolated locations within the large farms or on the narrow strips of public land along the roads and in the periphery of urban areas.

Given the persistent challenges faced for many generations, it is no surprise that most scholars working in the 1950s and 1960s were unable to anticipate that the Guarani-Kaiowa would survive into the new century as a cohesive group with a relatively large population (around 45,000 individuals currently living in Brazil, with an equivalent number living in Paraguay) that maintains distinctive habits, mythology, religion and language. For example, Schaden (1969) was very pessimistic in relation to the mounting pressure exerted by the non-Indigenous society and identified religion and mysticism as the only alternative, although it was thought to be impossible to alter the trends of destruction and acculturation. Even the defiance of some charismatic religious leaders at the time who fought to preserve at least part of the original territory (such as the venerated shaman [*nbanderu*] Pa'i Chiquito in Panambizinho, to the north of the city of Dourados) was considered by Schaden as just a form of fruitless escapism. Pessimism was fuelled by the intolerance of authorities, landowners and most urban dwellers to accept Indigenous individuals and families roving around the region and potentially trying to reclaim their land. The long trend of exploitation and piecemeal concessions resulted in a situation in which Indigenous people were seen by many segments of society as little more than a simulacrum of themselves. One of the most dramatic consequences was the sustained levels of suicide: in 1981 there were three cases of suicide, but in 1995 there were 55, which remained high in subsequent years (CIMI, 2001).

However, and crucially, most analysts had failed to perceive that the hardship faced by the regional Indigenous population, despite all the suffering, was unable to completely erase the main pillars of Guarani-Kaiowa world. At the same time, their ability to survive and cope with hostile socio-spatial pressures has also been dialectically connected with commonalities with other subaltern social groups, such as landless peasants and low paid workers. As discussed next, since the late 1970s, the Guarani-Kaiowa have appropriated defining elements of the labour and union movement that flourished in the final period of the Brazilian military dictatorship (1964-1985) to form a strong alliance across the various communities and clans (i.e. extended families), which culminate in regular meetings and shared ceremonies that now guide their socio-spatial

political strategies at the regional and international levels. Before we examine the specific reactions of the Guarani-Kaiowa to politico-economic pressures and disruptive socio-spatial forces, it must be noted that our analysis can greatly benefit from the observation of Escobar (2008) that there is a political dimension to ontology and an ontological dimension to politics. Along those lines, Blaser (2014) argues that a conversation between ontology and indigeneity is a crucial contemporary 'project' of academic and socio-economic repercussions. Blaser combines two conceptual frameworks to allow political ontology to interrogate commonalities and singularities amongst social groups, including Indigenous peoples.

First, the influence of the geographical notion of emergent assemblages through which the regular division between human and more-than-human categories is challenged. The knowledge of Indigenous groups is particularly valuable here to trouble apparently stable categorisations of reality forged according to Western ideologies. Second, ethnographic theory helps to ascertain the multiplicity of worlds, not simply as a claim of multiple ontologies (that replicate the classification of the 'other' with a fixed ontological status), but as a pluriverse strongly shaped by ontological multiplicity. Ontology thus becomes a way of 'worlding', as in the case of Indigenous accounts of reality, which are more than denotative narratives but part of a performance that defies development and coloniality. According to Blaser, political ontology is extremely relevant to engage with Indigenous questions, as much as Indigenous ontologies are intrinsically political. In the same way, the pluriverse undermines empty calls for universalism related to a common world order that is emptied of the political. The term political ontology is, therefore, "meant to simultaneously imply a certain political sensibility, a problem space and a modality of analysis or critique" (Blaser, 2013, 552). That means, respectively, a commitment to the pluriverse in the face of a poor universalism, different ways of worlding that mingle with each other and an analysis that is concerned with reality making and with participation in the transformation of such reality.

Nonetheless, there are two important caveats that must be borne in mind regarding political ontology and indigeneity as formulated by the last two authors. The description of the world as emergent assemblages is based on what are called 'flat ontologies' that bundle together a variety of different philosophical theses under a single term that emphasises the unforeseen properties that surface from the interaction between different parts. As discussed by Escobar (2007), the aim of assemblage theory is to challenge established social theories based on the totality of structures such as state and market because of the irreducible complexity of reality. The limitation of this approach, however, is the overstated emphasis on flat, autonomous networks and singular individuals at the expense of shared processes that are also at work, in

non-deterministic but equivalent ways, in different places and times. It means that assemblages make it hard to connect local, specific processes with common pressures and shared disruptive forces, such as market-based globalisation and the commodification of interpersonal relations. Second, the claim that the category of pluriverse is superior to the concept of multiple ontologies may lead to a disempowering relativism that reduces the importance and the materiality of social degradation and socio-ecological impacts. Linked to the shortcomings of assemblage theory, the criticism of a rigid structuralist positions through the emphasis on the pluriverse, although pertinent, should not set in motion the unhelpful contextualism of relativist (i.e. total contingency) approaches. Conventional descriptions of complex realities cannot be replaced with an ontology of fragmented micro-universes that seem to be dissociated from overarching politico-economic pressures and tendencies.

On the one hand, it is important to account for the political ontology of Indigenous peoples beyond generic categorisations that end up perpetuating abstract descriptors (e.g. ‘Indians’) divested of protagonism and initiative. On the other, the idiosyncrasies of each individual experience also share commonalities with other socio-economic trajectories and related processes of control and exploitation. To be sure, the condition of groups like the Guarani-Kaiowa is obviously not a direct product of a capitalist *Deus ex machina*, but their defiant crusade for land and survival has many parallels and synergies with the mobilisation of workers, peasants, migrants and other minorities. There exists a true dialect of sameness and difference that is not merely related to the fact that these groups have comparable goals (e.g. peasants also struggle for land, migrants call for jobs and recognition, and Indigenous individuals are increasingly found in cities and completing postgraduate degrees) but derives also from specific power-laden struggles that bring into being unique ontological statuses. In other words, the socio-spatial trajectory of subordinate classes demonstrates the shared impacts of hegemonic forces of development and territorial conquest, as much as characteristic political agencies informed by worldview perspectives and the placed-based practices of each group. Beyond the relativist risks associated the abstract generalisations, the political agency of Indigenous people is mobilised through specific spaces and times, it is a resistance that “uses extant geographies and makes new geographies” (Pile, 1997, 2).

The political initiative of individual social groups amid the oppressive universality of capitalism starts with the strengthening of singularities and awareness of how they function in the contemporary universal world. From a critical ontological perspective, socio-political agency is conditioned by processes that are both local, specific and general, extensive. This convergence unfolds within and against the hegemonic socio-spatiality of capitalist society that paradoxically,

as affirmed by Marx, “is predicated on the universalization of the feeling of equivalence and the irrepressible demands for equality that such juridical equivalence ends up producing” (Jameson, 1994, 66). According to Badiou (1988), being is an infinite multiplicity, or a multiple of multiples, and the 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. Badiou rejects the post-structuralist reluctance to consider a subject as an active, conscious agent, and the widespread obsession with semiotics, linguistics and incommensurability, in order to propose “*l’ontologie du singulier*”, which transgresses the positivist separation between general and particular characteristic of western dualisms. For Badiou, there is a universal ‘truth’, but only in so far as it is created in something absolutely singular (a place, territory, location) and it is universal only for a specific world (Badiou, 2006). The space for political action emerges from the profound dialectical tension between the de-singularisation of the singular and the de-universalisation of the universal. “*L’universalité située d’un énoncé politique n’est expérimentable que dans la pratique militante qui l’effectue*” (Badiou, 2014). The indeterminacy of the singular underpins the radical potential for both equality and freedom.

In a moment when social scientists are obsessed with what is fragmented and impermanent, Badiou argues that it is not just languages and bodies that must be considered, but also truths (*Il n’y a que des corps et des langages, sinon qu’il y a des vérités*) (Badiou, 2006, 12). Truth is, thus, universal but it is necessarily created out of singularities (a place, a community, etc.) and is conditioned by the interplay between the multiplicities and specificities of the world. The truth of a situation is the generic multiple consisting of particular features that are gradually separated out from others due to their being connected to an event that ruptures the appearance of normality (Feltham, 2008). Badiou (2018) further indicates that being is the effect of its own multiplicity and it is perpetually disrupted by the event. 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 events are what open the possibility of political intervention; there is no original situation which produces events, but the world is a contingency. 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.

Therefore, existence comes to be through its belonging to situations whose contingent truth is conditioned by the possibility of new, transformative events. These are ‘truth procedures’ that depend on the interplay between particular circumstances and the condition shared with other groups and classes. Social truth is grounded in the concrete experience of contestation and collective defiance of iniquitous socio-spatial order. One major analytical difficulty, however, is to properly comprehend the unique political subjectivities and interpersonal relations within an Indigenous group, particularly when trapped in processes of acute violence and multiple transformations. Most analyses produced during the post-World War II expansion of agrarian capitalism, as the aforementioned Schaden (1969), seemed to indicate that the Guarani-Kaiowa were reaching the end of the line and that the fierce assimilationist policies were going to prevail. However, despite all the genocidal pressures of development (Oglesby and Ross, 2009), the Guarani-Kaiowa managed to survive, grow 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 around 200 areas illegally appropriated by the national state and its business interests.<sup>1</sup> 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, the world that had been lost to or severely impacted by 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. Regular annual assemblies (called *Aty Guassu*) have been held ever since to bring together members and leaders of different Guarani-Kaiowa collectives to decide on their next political move, as well as to foster interaction with non-Indigenous allies and the wider Indigenous community. *Aty Guassu* is a genuine ‘truth procedure’, in the sense proposed by Badiou, given that it produces truths at the same time that they are pursued; the condition and the basic needs of each community are discussed during the assembly, which is then used to formulate short-term and long-term socio-political interventions and, in particular, guide the recovery of lands lost to development (more than eight million hectares have been historically appropriated by governments and farmers, according to CIMI, 2001). More significantly, the *Aty Guassu* plays a very important role in the affirmation of an Indigenous identity that is deeply

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<sup>1</sup> Such growing indigenous mobilisation has not been ignored by the far right-wing government elected in 2018: the very first acts of the new 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 notorious enemies of the Guarani-Kaiowa (lawyers, politicians and landowners) in important decision-making posts.

political and a politics that reflects the Guarani-Kaiowa existence and its strong spatial attachments. In the words of the assembly's spokesperson, the leader Ava Vera Arandu (also known as Tónico Benites),

*“to be Guarani-Kaiowa means to belong to specific lands and, above all, to be connected with the guardians [spiritual entities] of natural resources and maintain a relationship of mutual respect. It means being an unfaltering warrior or fighter for the piece of ancient land where your ancestors are buried. If necessary, sacrifice yourself and die with honour for the lands of your forefathers. Being a Guarani-Kaiowa means to insist in the fulfilment of collective dreams. To be a Guarani-Kaiowa means to be a believer and a prophet who fights and prays for a better future for the new generations. Being Guarani-Kaiowa means creating joy, smiling a lot and listening carefully. Being Guarani-Kaiowa means getting repeated advice to not react violently to violence.”* (Revista Época, 26 November 2012, interview to Eliane Brum)

The ontological basis of the political agenda agreed and heartened during the *Aty Guassu* corresponds to the observation made by Rancière (1995, 31) that it is precisely politics that allows subaltern, destitute groups to exist as an autonomous force and to become influential social agents (“*Il n’y a pas de la politique simplement parce que les pauvres s’opposent aux riches [...] c’est la politique [...] qui fait exister les pauvres comme entité?*”). Badiou (1998, in Swyngedouw, 2014) further argues that the political is not a reflection of something else (such as cultural, social or economic dimensions), but is rather the capacity to act politically. For Badiou, the political is “a site open for occupation by those who call it into being, render it visible, and stage its occupation, irrespective of the ‘place’ they occupy within the social edifice” (Swyngedouw, 2014, 123). The political is an emergent property that is articulated through disrupting the situation.

The contemporary condition of the Guarani-Kaiowa is, thus, the result of an extended, largely silent but well-crafted process of political mobilisation to claim their own world, which means that they have wisely cherished a capacity to act politically because of their unique identity but also struggles shared with other social groups. Their land was 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 resisted and remained 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. Overall, the Guarani-

Kaiowa's ontological condition represents an emblematic demonstration of how socio-spatial margins can be confronted and shaped, and of the intransigence of Brazilian political economic trends, perpetuated by the vicious reaffirmation of patrimonialism, paternalism and militarised logic (certainly worsened after 2018, but what also triggered fierce, coordinated reactions). More importantly, because of their creative agency and accumulated knowledge, these groups have developed escape and resistance strategies (with varying levels of success), converting the negative politics of aggression into a *politics of resistance and anticipation* because of the ontological basis of their struggle. The Guarani-Kaiowa have certainly been incorporated in the domain of capital accumulation and labour exploitation, but they have also managed to mobilise identities and knowledge to challenge hegemonic processes of appropriation and exploitation.

The best demonstration of the connection between Guarani-Kaiowa ontological references and their socio-spatial demands is the process of *retomada* (in Portuguese, or 'retaking' in English) of areas lost to regional development in previous decades. The *retomadas* have an important precedent in the continuous struggles of the Kaiowa against the combined oppression of state, church and farmers, even when harsh punishment and even death were almost inevitable. The general feeling that underpins the *retomadas* is expressed 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. Through the *retomadas* the Guarani-Kaiowa have tried to take legislation into their own hands and have pushed for the enforcement of the 1988 Brazilian Constitution, which has determined that ancestral Indigenous rights take precedence over other land claims (with no compensation for those who previously invaded Indigenous areas, a crucial legal principle but that is repeatedly used as an excuse by the farmers and allies to fiercely oppose the homologation of Indigenous lands). The *retomada* is an autonomous action that typically starts with a complex, incremental negotiation within the community and building a collective will to take action, finally endorsed by the wider Indigenous society through the *Aty Guassu*. The strategy required for Guarani-Kaiowa *retomadas* is discussed before and during the *Aty Guassu*, when the participants identify tactics, make collective decisions, prepare publicity documents and invoke spiritual guidance and protection.

When a particular community, with support from relatives and friends living elsewhere, decides to proceed with the reoccupation of a *tekoha* – an important Guarani concept that refers to the land held and used by an extended family or community and also encapsulates relational dimensions of co-being, co-belonging, and co-becoming between people and land; in recent

years, the expression *tekoha* has become a symbol of the multidimensional complexity and ontological magnitude of the land struggle, constantly used in documents and statements put forward by the Guarani-Kaiowa – they will march towards their land, set up encampments and try to resist (making use of religious rituals and symbolic practices) the inevitable reaction of the farmers occupying their land. According to Benites (2014), the four nights before the *retomada* are of an even more intense religiosity, when the warriors are baptised as a requirement to be recognised and accepted by the spirits of their ancestors and to be protected against evil spirits and invisible beings. The night before the reoccupation of the land, faces and parts of the body are painted with red-colour *urucum* (*Bixa orellana*, the same as achiote) and 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 recover the area that one day was grabbed from them or their relatives. 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 a 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 an ontological position that can be described as: ‘I am because I fight and fight in order to continue to exist’. Note in the following extract:

*“We fought for this place, for many years, my father and my mother are already dead, but I carry on their struggle, I am taking it forward; it was 25 years ago, almost 30, when we recovered this tekoha. (...) We took and continue to take [our demands] to the Aty Guassu. This year the meeting will take place here. That is good because recently, a farmer attacked us with his car, about 40 kilometres from here, fortunately nothing serious happened. We fought and we have this small piece of land, where we have our cemetery, but the farmer invaded it and even planted soybean... But we continue our campaign [to recover the rest of the land still controlled by the neighbouring farmer] and gradually we will win it back. We definitely need more space, it is [basically] our land, because our community is very large now, we are more than 300 people and right now we only have 404 hectares.”* [male community leader (cacique), Jaguary, municipality of Amambai]

In recent decades the Kaiowa have managed to recover more than 20 areas, although the farmers who (illegally) claim ownership of the land have reacted in different ways, frequently through the use of brutal violence. The *retomadas* have been ferociously attacked by conservative political groups, particularly the multi-party agribusiness lobby, one of the larger and better coordinated pressure groups 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. Unfavourable and unfair court decisions have combined legalist biases with ideological positivism, mobilised to disregard the concrete violence against the Guarani-Kaiowa as a form ‘moral blindness’ (Nascimento, 2016). There are clear parallels with the intimidation of other Guarani groups in Bolivia, where policies aiming to formalise Indigenous territories, funded by the World Bank and implemented by a neoliberal government, ultimately facilitated the expropriation of resources and mobilised farmers and local politicians against communities (Anthias, 2017). There have been repeated violent clashes between Indigenous groups, the police apparatus and private militias. Private militias, known as *pistoleiros* or ‘hired guns’ (usually active or retired policemen), are maintained by farmers and their representative associations. For instance, the ‘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-Amambaipaguá (this highly volatile dispute remains unsettled, and additional skirmishes were recorded in the following years).

In the end, the Guarani-Kaiowa’s existence has been marked by simultaneous processes of socio-spatial subtraction and politico-strategic reaction, which have acquired great ontological and political complexity. 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 demands for just compensation and the intolerance of advancing modernisation (the ‘machine’ that recognises no world, as critiqued by Stengers, 2018). Despite many setbacks in the courts and the strong obstruction caused by farmers, the Guarani-Kaiowa have accumulated sufficient strength to retake significantly larger areas than in previous decades (areas of around 10,000 hectares are now common) and to claim rights over an even greater territory (*tekoba guassu* or *tekoharã*) that resembles the pre-colonisation space (Barbosa and Mura, 2011). Once removed from the material, symbolic and spiritual elements of their ancestral space, the Guarani-Kaiowa became inserted in a recurrent struggle for survival and for the recognition of basic human rights that is grounded in particular components of their identity and community interaction. 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. The conflict has become 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 (the *tekoba* of each clan or community). The political movement to return and rebuild their ancient, ancestral places makes the Guarani-Kaiowa experience extremely emblematic of grassroots agency and at the same time a vital component of the much wider effort to decolonise society and economy.

### **THE ONTOLOGISED POLITICS OF DIFFERENCE AND EQUALITY**

The previous pages have presented the socio-spatial struggle of the Guarani-Kaiowa, an Indigenous group that is actively trying to overcome persistent genocidal pressures and to maintain key elements of their world through the recovery of ancestral areas lost to regional development. This concrete example of imbricated Indigenous and non-Indigenous worlds is instrumental for demonstrating the application of political ontology as a tool for interrogating the impacts of Western modernity and the concepts normally used to justify the advance of agrarian capitalism. The Guarani-Kaiowa have been partially assimilated in the course of colonisation and agricultural expansion, so that they could be contained and exploited through depersonalised market-based relations. In that way, socio-spatial differences were manipulated to render them invisible from a mainstream development perspective and to justify the appropriation of Indigenous land and other illegal and racist practices. 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, a 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. 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 imaginaries and concrete social relations. This question can only be properly understood by considering what makes Indigenous unique and which other ontological attributes intersect with identity-based boundaries.

Despite some partial, but meaningful, land recovery victories, scholars 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. The trajectory of

Indigenous groups like the Guarani-Kaiowa exposes the intricate dialectic of specific and general ontological categories. Huxley (1932) provided a well-known caricature of the artificial segregation between ‘advanced’ and ‘Indigenous’ segments of the population, where the latter had to live in reservations and could still reproduce through regular sex, whilst the rest of the brave new society used a mechanical and controlled form of reproduction (engineered through artificial wombs and childhood indoctrination programmes). Even in a ‘brave new world’, difference was not fully erased, but coexisted with universalising process of oppression and control. 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*). Indigenous groups today, in different and individualised ways, occupy an in-between ontological status and are typically relegated to existential frontiers (Ioris, 2018). Note the following:

*“After a long journey and a great effort, my parents came back to this land, where we have several cemeteries and many people buried. Before he died, my father, who was the leader, told me to stay here and protect our settlement, asked me to go before the government and argue our case. We [he and his wife] are old now, we returned to our land, and we have a lot to tell, because we must teach all to put up with and have strength, to enforce the law and do the right things, with wisdom. (...) I pray to our Maker and ask for support, so we can have a good life [teko porã, in Guarani], cultivate white maize, plant branches of manioc and have what we need.”* [male elder, around 80 years old, Indigenous name Tupã Guasu, former community leader, Panambizinho, municipality of Dourados]

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 distinctive 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. 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 unique features beyond conventional class-based accounts. 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 dissimilar 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.

Ontological differences and Indigenous identities are certainly 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 peculiar to them. The political identities of Indigenous groups are neither invented nor based on any sort of essentialist foundation, but are rather informed by complex practices and traditions that resisted the colonial onslaught and continue to structure present-day Indigenous activism (Alfred, 1995). A collective effort to retain a social and spatial distinctiveness is, first of all, a political statement about the perverse, uneven relations that affect Indigenous lives from local to international levels. The main conclusion is that *what makes Indigenous peoples unique is how perceived and charged social differences are mobilised according to the political goals of different groups and in relation to a spatial setting that is simultaneously lost, desired and anticipated*. Indigenous groups raise specific 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 remote and diffuse attachments to their ancestral spatial settings, it is also distinct and dynamic.

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. This land-based politics is described by Oliveira (1986) and other anthropologists as 'interethnic friction'. As a result of this 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' 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.

In that regard, the growing interest in ontological investigations 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. colonial-capitalist vs. originary societies), and how Indigenous peoples strive to sustain their own existence (Blaser, 2009). What is commonly described as globalisation is also 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. 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 (Ruiz 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 reveal 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. 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).

All this demonstrates an enduring political agency that results from Indigenous people’s very continuation as distinctive groups, as much as their existence is the result of skilled, space-related politics. The exceptional 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. In other words, the existence of the Indigenous person derives from the rational, emotional and symbolic attachments to Guarani-Kaiowa ontological references and

connections with the experiences accumulated over generations. Their spirituality, in particular, is not separated from other social and economic dimensions of human activity and is an integral part of their history (in any case, these are all academic, Western analytical categories that need to be carefully used in relation to the life of Indigenous people). Certainly identity and difference have been fundamental analytical categories from pre-Socratic times to Hegel's 'identity of identity and non-identity' (Jameson, 1994), but the special 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. 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 crux of this group's politics of identity is that they only remain Guarani-Kaiowa because of their collective cause, substantiated and inspired by the restoration of the material and symbolic elements of the original Indigenous condition, even if this restitution is far from certain. In their imaginary, they must fight because they are the fight, in other words, without their land-based struggle they are less and less themselves. At the same time, they retain important ontological features shared with other subaltern groups affected by the unrelenting advance of a racist and exclusionary modernity that continues to be the main source of socio-spatial inequality and socio-ecological degradation in the world today. Finally, the dialectic between the ontological condition of individual groups and shared processes of politico-economic change can help to expose, and react against, accumulated injustices and multiple forms of discrimination.

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