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The postponement of the 2008 IUAES Congress

Anthropology, Human Rights and China¹

Gustavo Lins Ribeiro

- 1 The postponement, indefinitely, of the 16th World Congress of the International Union of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences (IUAES), due to take place in Kunming, China, on the 15th of July of the current year, illustrates how the imminence of the Beijing 2008 Olympic games is « pushing » the Chinese government to take extra measures to control the impact that the situation in Tibet might have on its international image. For many, the 21st century will be the Chinese era, an era marked by a shift in global hegemony from the U.S. to China. For this reason, it is in the Chinese State's best interests to show the world that they are capable of handling conflict situations and issues, without transgressing the prevalent notions of human rights in the West, regarded as universal. It is an intricate task : not only because the universal human rights discourse is being used to control the escalating importance of China in the global scenario ; but also due to the recent rebellious events in Tibet that have caused many deaths and the life imprisonment of many leaders for resisting the Chinese nationalist movement, thus re-awakening accusations of violence perpetrated by the Chinese State.
- 2 Ethnic minorities, in all nation-states, have always been, deliberately or not, targets of institutional violence. However, in the last 20 years a shift has taken place towards the need to « pluralize » the State in order to reflect the plural nature of the Nation. Nonetheless, previous homogenizing ideologies of the State, of democracy, of public life and access to modernity benefits, are still alive and reappear at different times and spaces, agitating the ghosts of « national security ».
- 3 This last minute postponement of a congress involving 6000 anthropologists from all over the world, which, until recently, was being supported by diverse organs of the Chinese State, is out of the ordinary. The international Anthropology community is aware that some voices had arisen in different countries to boycott the congress because of the events in Tibet. Emails were circulated attributing to the Chinese State commission of ethnic affairs the order to prevent the congress from taking place. It is indeed difficult

not to see the spectre of Tibet behind this huge international disappointment and mishap. In fact, many believed that an Anthropology world congress in China would be the perfect opportunity for anthropologists to openly and academically discuss minorities' and human rights' matters, in China and in other countries. It is important to acknowledge the effort of our Chinese colleagues to increase their relationship with the international academic community, an obvious by-product of a world congress. Nonetheless, even if, eventually, the congress does take place, its « postponement » has reinforced a sense of isolation.

- 4 The question might seem naïve, but it's not : is the Chinese State prepared to face the wide range of opinions and critiques that will arise in a public discussion forum out of its control ? A negative answer to this question would raise serious doubts about how China will conduct its expanding globalization efforts overseas. It would be naïve to believe in the possibility of being able to control a large and sophisticated community, such as that of anthropologists who are deeply-rooted in democratic principles and where respect for difference is an important value. Any State's wish for global hegemony carries with it the need to be open to cosmopolitan ideas and a disposition to deal with heteroglossic communicative encounters and to be able to negotiate via critical dialogues, rather than to understand them as a threat to the State.
- 5 In short, China has just lost a major opportunity to show a different face to the world.

NOTES

1. This text was published in *Folha de São Paulo*, May 25, 2008.
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