

BETWEEN DISCIPLINES: CLASSICAL, ANCIENT HISTORY AND CLASSICAL STUDIES IN BRAZIL

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Abstract

This text proposes a personal reflection on the boundaries and intersections between Classical Language and Literature, Ancient History, and Classical Studies in Brazil. We aim to examine how these fields are institutionally structured within Brazilian universities from a critical perspective, contrasting them with other possible models. We consider it highly important to reflect on the specificities of studying Antiquity within a Brazilian context—a peripheric and multilingual one.

Keywords

Antiquity in Brazil; Brazilian higher education; Interdisciplinarity; Latin American Classical Studies.

Resumo

Este texto propõe uma reflexão pessoal sobre os contornos e as interseções entre as áreas de Letras Clássicas, História Antiga e os Estudos Clássicos no Brasil. A partir de uma perspectiva crítica, pretendemos pensar como essas áreas estão institucionalmente configuradas nas universidades brasileiras, contrastando-as com outras possibilidades. Entendemos que é de grande importância pensar as especificidades do estudo da Antiguidade dentro de uma realidade brasileira, periférica e multilíngue.

Palavras-chave

Antiguidade no Brasil; Ensino superior brasileiro; Interdisciplinaridade; Estudos clássicos latino-americanos.

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As a scholar of Classical Language and Literature in Brazil, having done my postgraduate training in the early years of the twenty-first century, much of my academic life has been spent in an uncomfortable place, which is the interdisciplinary border between Language and Literature and History, as they are understood in our academic system. This space, which is interdisciplinary because it is *between disciplines*, that is, in the middle of the way, causes difficulties to those who follow it, from the moment that, when filling out the documents that govern academic life in Brazil, such as Lattes, it is necessary to decide for one or the other – because there is no room for both – to when, in a panel or event, a specific position is expected, usually expressed in the formula often heard on such occasions, from the mouths of respected academic professionals: “I am not from this field.”

But what determines being from a field? Just the formal degree acquired at a university? The field or theme in which the researcher conducted his training at the doctoral level? If we think so, Foucault would be a philosopher and psychologist; Roland Barthes would be a classicist, with a thesis on Greek tragedy; Todorov had a Doctorate in Language and Literature, Max Weber was a Doctor of Law, Hannah Arendt was a specialist in St. Augustine, Chomsky could only talk about linguistics and Roger Chartier, a historian. But all these thinkers had an impact far beyond the areas of specialty demarked by their doctoral work and therefore wrote with propriety about *other fields*.

However, it seems clear that many of them, in doing so, also felt the pressure of having to be from *one* field. This is what one realizes when reading Hayden White’s page, still available online at the University of Michigan, in which the author, who died in 2018, says: “I am a historian (paleographer, Weberian, narrativist) who blundered, first, into literary criticism (philology, semiotics, New Criticism) and then, into philosophy (classics, Vico, Foucault, and Deleuze). I still do not understand the authority enjoyed by Aristotle in these three domains of inquiry.” The use of *blunder* (stumbling, but also walking blindly, speaking inadvertently, or spoiling) is quite significant, it betrays this feeling of crossing a forbidden border, inappropriately, or even incapably. After all, the fields are clearly delimited in the various disciplines, which belong to their certain Departments, subordinated to the Centers or Faculties, in an organization clearly delimited in a flowchart of the University. This certainty is, of course, an illusion, easily dispelled by a comparison between

the systems, not only between different countries, but sometimes within the same country, in neighboring institutions. The first time I realized this was when I left the Institute of Language and Literature of UERJ, within the Center for Education and Humanities, for postgraduate studies at the Faculty of Language and Literature of UFRJ, within the Center for Language and Literature and Arts, along with the Faculty of Architecture, the School of Music and the School of Fine Arts. As the reader has certainly understood, we are talking about options of institutional organization, which have, therefore, more to do with historically determined political choices, than with any immanence of knowledge. So, the question to ask is: how did we get to this organization?

The University in Brazil: a brief history

The university in Brazil has a distinct history compared to other regions of the world, marked by a late start. During the so-called colonial period, the educational model imposed by Portugal restricted the creation of higher education institutions in the colony. Young Brazilians who wished to pursue advanced studies had to travel to Europe, especially to Coimbra.² The justification for this absence of universities was political and strategic: to centralized intellectual and administrative control in Portugal's metropolis. Thus, unlike other Latin American countries colonized by Spain, such as Peru and Mexico, which had universities since the sixteenth century, Brazil only began to institute higher education in the nineteenth century. Although many of the schools in Portuguese America offered quality education, requests for the formal establishment of Higher Education in Brazil were systematically denied (Elias, Martins, Moreira, 2017).

If we were to choose a starting point of higher education in Brazil, perhaps the most obvious is 1808, with the arrival of the Portuguese court in Rio de Janeiro. Given this context, the first higher education schools with a professional focus were created, such as the School of Surgery of Bahia and the Anatomical, Surgical, and Medical School of Rio de Janeiro, both founded in 1808. These institutions, however, were not configured as universities in the full sense of the term, as they were isolated and specialized schools, focusing on areas such as Medicine, Law, and Engineering.

The first proper Brazilian university was the University of Rio de Janeiro, created in 1920, from the union of several colleges. Later renamed University

² For an in-depth view of this process, cf. Cunha (2007), especially the first volume.

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of Brazil, it formed the basis of the current Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (Oliveira. undated). The creation of the university aimed not only to institutionally organize higher education, but also to meet the symbolic requirements of an independent nation that sought to affirm its cultural and scientific identity.

Throughout the twentieth century, the Brazilian university expansion gained strength with the creation of other public institutions, such as the Federal University of Minas Gerais (UFMG), in 1927, then UMG, also from the merger of four colleges already existing in Belo Horizonte; and the University of São Paulo (USP), founded in 1934 with a strong influence of the French Mission. The Brazilian university model, since then, has been consolidated under the aegis of the continental European model, with traces of the Napoleonic system. Although this is not the place for a deeper study of this theme, it is important to point out how the current Brazilian university still has much of the model proposed by Georges Cabanis in the early nineteenth century and institutionalized under Napoleon Bonaparte.³ This model, centered on vocational training, established rigid curricula, fragmented by disciplines and aimed at obtaining diplomas in practical areas such as Medicine, Engineering, and Law. In this system, the university is not constituted as a unified institution focused on the production of knowledge, but rather as a federation of colleges and schools with administrative autonomy and little dialogue between them. The priority is on technical instruction and curriculum standardization, with linear progression and little openness to research or interdisciplinarity. As Oliveira (undated) says, “(...) This gathering of establishments in a university did not imply an approximation of relations and exchange of knowledge necessary for the existence of the ‘university spirit’” (our translation).

In contrast, the Humboldtian model, formulated at the same time in Germany, and that forms the ideal of institutions not only in Germany but also in other parts of the Global North, conceived the university as an autonomous space for the production of knowledge, in which teaching and research are organically articulated, and general human formation is valued as much as specialization. However, this ideal was never consolidated as a structural basis in Brazil. Although Humboldtian elements are present in graduate and research centers, the Brazilian university remains mostly Cabanisian, focused

³ Almeida Filho (2022) is a recent and in-depth study on the impact of Cabanis on the theory of education.

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on professionalization and structured in a fragmented way, which limits the development of a more integrated university culture. Let us keep this in mind.

Classical Studies at the Brazilian University

But, what about studies on the ancient world – what today we may call Classical Studies, including studies of Ancient History, Ancient Philosophy, Ancient Literature, and everything else that refers to Greece and Rome? Within the panorama of the creation of universities in Brazil, between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the Classical Studies field arrives with deep roots in the imperial period, when Latin was a mandatory component of secondary education. The *Public Instruction Regulation* of 1854, for example, consolidated Latin as a central subject in the schools of the Empire, especially as preparation for higher education. Ancient Greek was also taught, albeit less often. The mastery of classical languages was, in that context, a marker of cultural and intellectual distinction. But even beyond the mastery of languages, which has always belonged to the elite, the knowledge of Philosophy, History, and the Ancient World in general, remained central within a society that, although forming a body of secular educational institutions, was still extremely linked to education from religious orders, fresh out of a theological-political *Ancien Régime*, in which History was the master of life and the past examples of morally edified the man – who was to build a teleologically determined future. If we take as an example the subject of History at Colégio Pedro II – from where ideas on education irradiated in the period in question – we see how it was identified with the classical humanities. Composing a subject together with Geography, its contents of Universal History had morality and religion as reference to guide the spirits and Greece and Rome as inspiration (Santos, 2015). Thus, Antiquity studies, with the History of Greece and of Rome were the main components of the course. Such a perspective of centrality in the classical past, knowledge about Athens and Rome, about Solon and Caesar, guided Education in the country. Therefore, there was not one specific field for Classical Studies – students would find elements of the Ancient World as the cornerstones of their studies in general. Notably, the lessons framework of the *Regulation of Colégio Pedro II* shows that for one week of teaching: Latin classes had the largest weekly workload (50 periods), followed by Greek (18 periods), Rhetoric and Poetics (20 periods), Philosophy (20 periods), History (12 periods), and Geography (11 periods). The disciplines that make up the so-called Natural Sciences

appear in a second block, with Mathematics subdivided into Arithmetic, Geometry, Algebra, and Trigonometry/Mechanics, totaling 29 periods per week; Astronomy with three periods, Natural History with four periods, Physical Sciences with six periods, Drawing with eight periods, and Vocal Music with six periods. The students were in contact with elements of Antiquity in all the subjects of the first block.

In the twentieth century, with the establishment of the Republic and the subsequent educational reforms, the space of classical languages in secondary education was progressively reduced. Reforms such as those of Francisco Campos (1931) and Gustavo Capanema (1942) emphasized an education more focused on science and technical education, marginalizing humanistic studies. Nevertheless, it was in this same period that Classical Studies became institutionalized in Brazilian universities, especially with the creation of the Faculties of Philosophy, Sciences and Language and Literature—which, as previously mentioned, were generally not among the faculties in that first Napoleonic impulse, which included only professional studies. With the progressive, but inexorable, retreat of the humanities from Basic Education, as we know,⁴ Classical Studies in Brazil began to concentrate mainly on higher education. However, they were never established as field, because from the reality of Secondary Education, such as what we saw in Colégio Pedro II, and because of the vocational and professionalizing character of the model by which the Brazilian University was formed, knowledge about Antiquity was maintained in separate classes, disciplines, courses, and subjects: language is one thing, History is another, Philosophy is yet another. Thus, higher education institutions offer subjects in Latin, Ancient Greek, Classical Literature, and History of Antiquity, but within the Faculties or Institutes focused on those areas: Language and Literature, History, Philosophy, Music, Architecture, Arts.

A Brief Comparison

In the countries of the Global North, especially those in which the Humboldtian inspiration was strongest, the *Classics* field is usually structured as an autonomous field within universities, with its own departments covering the study of classical languages (Latin and Greek), literature, ancient

⁴ A more specific view of this process has already been explored, with greater attention to Latin, in Leite; Castro, 2014.

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philosophy, history, archaeology, and classical reception. In the United States and Canada, for example, it is common to find “Classics Department” in public and private universities, offering complete undergraduate and graduate programs. In Europe, the structure of Classical Studies varies according to the country, but in general it constitutes a consolidated disciplinary field with a strong philological tradition. In Germany, for example, the area is represented by departments of *Klassische Philologie*. In Italy, many universities maintain robust courses in Classical Philology, Literature, and Archaeology, underpinned by a long humanist tradition. In the United Kingdom, the Anglo-Saxon model structures departments of *Classics* or *Classics and Ancient History*. In all these contexts, Classical Studies maintain a disciplinary identity of their own.

The structuring of these fields is, therefore, derived from broader choices that guided the historical institutional organization in the various spaces. Even in universities of the Humboldtian type, the peculiarities of a philological work in relation to an archaeological or historical work are recognized, although all of them take place within the limits of Classical Studies. Similarly, researchers who dedicate themselves to Classical Studies in Brazil mutually recognize each other as related, even when linked to separate Departments, as demonstrated by the existence of a multidisciplinary society, the Brazilian Society of Classical Studies. In other words, despite the institutional distinctions and the different nomenclatures adopted between countries and universities, it is important to recognize that these divisions in the Classical Studies field—such as Philology, Ancient Philosophy, Archaeology, or Reception—are largely didactic and administrative constructions, created for curricular organization and distribution of competences. In practice, the field operates as an intellectual and methodological continuum, in which knowledge is intertwined in a fluid way: the reading of a Greek philosophical text requires philological skills; The study of Classical Archaeology implies knowledge of literary and historical sources; The modern reception of the classics demands familiarity with the ancient canon. Thus, although these emphases can direct research and form subspecializations, they should not—contrary to the forms we must fill out as part of the academic bureaucracy—be understood as watertight compartments, but rather as entry points into the same horizon of humanistic investigation that remains, in essence, integrated and interdisciplinary.

A proposal

Finally, a comment with a conclusive intention is in order, but which is in fact the central point of all this reflection. In contemporary Brazil, Classical Studies occupy a restricted space in university curricula and has practically disappeared from primary and secondary education. Although the contents are still studied in our universities, this almost always occurs in a punctual way as part of courses in Language and Literature, Philosophy, or History. This reduced reality, within a model that, as we have seen, is fragmentary, may have the result of limiting the access of new generations to the studies of Classical Antiquity. However, instead of lamenting an institutional precariousness, it is productive to think about how to use the peculiarities of this context to strengthen collaborative networks, rethink methodologies, and connect the classics to contemporary debates. Fragmentation can be, finally, an advantage: instead of being isolated in a single department, distant from other colleagues, Brazilian researchers with focus on Antiquity are connected, within their own departments, to researchers from other temporalities and other objects, which enables them to approach Antiquity via its relationship with other times and subjects, without the rigid limits of a traditional department. I understand that the strength of the area does not depend on its existence as a department or its formal presence in administrative structures, but on the capacity for collective action – with dialogue between researchers, professors, students, and communities.

Therefore, the key word for thinking about the present and future of Classical Studies in Brazil should be about collaboration. Faced with a fragmented institutional structure and an often peripheral field in universities, the most fertile path has been to create collaborative spaces, cross disciplinary and geographical boundaries, and invest in collective, open, and plural ways of working. This collaboration is a strategy of epistemological invention, not just an option. The formation of inter-institutional networks involving public universities through active research groups, as we have, and initiatives such as the GTHA have been fundamental to consolidating a horizontal and inclusive base of production and teaching.

Contemporary digital technologies – videoconferencing platforms, open repositories, collaborative databases, and tools for translation and annotation – exponentially expand these collaborative possibilities. *Corpora* textual and material can be organized and shared for analysis, reading, annotations, and collective translation; hybrid events enable the connection,

dialogue, and promotion of geographically distant research and researchers; And I even avoid giving more examples, because I feel that we are in a moment of profound technological transformations that can enhance our collaborations, if we so wish.

But it is necessary to think about these issues consciously, it is necessary to understand that in view of Brazil's position in the international academic system, in which the Global North still operates as a structural instance of both inclusion and isolation, it remains for us to clearly define in what terms we want to dialogue. The proposal is not a mere adaptation to hegemonic models, but the construction of a horizontal dialogue, which values our languages, themes, methodologies, and local urgencies. We want to penetrate these spaces—but with presence and epistemological self-rule. This means organizing bilingual and multilingual events, creating open critical editions, promoting collaborative translations, and inserting Brazilian voices in international forums without erasing our identities. Rather than waiting for external institutional recognition, we reaffirm our presence via collective action. But how?

Finally, we reach my field—not without a dose of irony—I use the linguistic issue as an example, which is central to Classical Studies in Brazil, encompassing both the mastery of ancient languages and the challenge of languages of contemporary academic production. Other points of view will be added for a more complete answer, but this is my contribution. On the one hand, we have the problem of mastering the ancient languages: Greek and Latin demand a lot from a student who has social and economic difficulties that we know well, and who has a world of knowledge to master. Hence, even if we well-intentioned tell students that the good Historian, Philosopher, Archaeologist, or whoever is dedicated to Antiquity must know at least one of the two languages, we know that in practice this occurs less often than it should. And, nevertheless, students of Language and Literature also do not have adequate mastery of the other areas of the Study of Antiquity. What to do about it? These are competencies that benefit significantly from collaborative practices. Forming multidisciplinary teams, bringing together literature researchers, philosophers, historians, and technologists, enables the researcher to share their knowledge, overcome barriers to access, and strengthen collective production. I, therefore, call for our research groups to be more and more interdisciplinary—or, if we think in Humboldtian terms, more purely of Classical Studies. Instead of demanding global knowledge from a researcher, let us demand plural knowledge from a group.

Nevertheless, the choice of publication language also raises important dilemmas. Publishing only in English can broaden the international reach, but it can also represent a way of *acculturation* or academic colonization, which silences local voices. In contrast, publishing only in Portuguese tends to limit dialogue with global interlocutors, isolating our production and restricting its intellectual circulation. To this question, I suggest that our group of researchers benefit from studies on semi-peripheral communities, which show that the strategic use of various languages – which they call *equivalent publishing* – enables dialogue with multiple audiences without renouncing the national linguistic heritage (Curry; Lillis, 2014). As a practical path, we can adopt a strategic multilingual model, which favors Portuguese in certain situations (national journals, extension, basic education), and English or other international languages in instances that require global visibility. Moreover, the practice of producing publications in dual versions has begun to spread, and we could make more use of *equivalent publishing*: generate adapted versions for specific audiences—for example, one version for a Brazilian journal, another for an international journal.

Contemporary technologies can be great allies in this endeavor: multilingual machine translation systems allow us to draft preliminary versions in another language, support collaborative revision, and build parallel corpora. However, these tools require judicious use: machine translations can distort nuances and argumentative structures specific to classical or Romance languages. Therefore, they should be seen as an aid, facilitating drafts, survey of technical terms, and preliminary revision, but not as substitutes for human work, sensitive to the rhetorical, cultural, and epistemological issues that cross our discourses. Then, again, we return to the importance of the multidisciplinary team, which integrates people with specific knowledge of the various areas. This multilingual agenda, grounded in collaboration, ensures that Brazil engages critically with the Global North, asserting its voice, language, and approach. At the top of this agenda, technology is a facilitating instrument, but the fundamental condition is still a critical reflection, conscious dialogue, and human care for the languages involved.

In conclusion

The specific characteristics of the Brazilian context, its cultural, linguistic, and regional diversity, as well as the historical challenges of access and resources, have the potential to strengthen a model of Classical Studies based on *Heródoto*, Unifesp, Guarulhos, v.10, n.2, 2025.2. p. 101-112.
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collaboration and collectivity. Unlike more individualistic and competitive academic traditions, often centered on the praise of isolated personal achievement, the Brazilian scenario invites us to build solidarity networks in which knowledge grows and is renewed from joint effort. This orientation towards the collective enables the creation of more humane, open, and inclusive academic environments, in which constant exchange and the multiplicity of perspectives are valued as a source of innovation and resistance. Thus, the Brazilian reality, far from being a limitation, can become an epistemological advantage that inspires original forms of production and knowledge sharing, making the field of Classical Studies more connected, diverse, and vital for the twenty-first century.

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