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## Countercolonialism and Legal History Through the Lens of a Black Bishop

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## Countercolonialism and Legal History Through the Lens of a Black Bishop\*

*A terra dá, a terra quer* is the last »offering« that Antônio Bispo dos Santos, better known as Nêgo Bispo, »sows« into the earth. I refer to it as an offering, rather than a book, given the manner in which this text is presented by this cultivator of ancestral wisdom: as seeds, fortresses of power for life's preservation. As he used to say, his words were »germinating« (germinantes).

Nêgo Bispo was born in the Berlengas River Valley, in Brazil. He received his initial education under the tutelage of the oral tradition masters in the Saco-Cortume *Quilombo*, situated in the municipality of São João do Piauí. *Quilombos*, broadly speaking, are self-governing communities of social resistance established by enslaved Black populations during the colonial era. Since the 16th century, numerous *quilombola* communities have emerged, and today, hundreds of them remain in Brazil.

Unlike his ancestors, Bispo was the first of his generation to have access to literacy. He emerged as an intellectual who translated his *quilombola* cosmivision and countercolonial worldview into books, articles, lectures and poems. Renowned for his political action, he actively defended traditional territories, symbols, meanings and ways of life, which he terms »organic« in his writings. He learned to sow words in his daily relationship with nature, the elders and the movements advocating traditional territories. From this rich experience, Bispo developed his philosophical framework. In his theory, the author did not imagine a new world. His writings are based on a concrete world: his *quilombola* world, which engages in a dialogue with other worldviews on an equal footing.

In his most recent book, one can sense the impact of this cosmic perspective and gain an understanding of its influences. Indeed, this reflects the author's desire: that people from academia, members of other epistemic communities,

can somehow access his knowledge, feel it and apply it.

The book does not contain scholarly texts, like those an academic might be used to. It comprises writings deeply permeated by his oral and circular cosmivision. Consequently, it is not a linear, schematic guidebook. This piece of writing poetically translates knowledge that has been transmitted orally to him. After all, as Antonio Bispo explains, the *quilombolas* are people of trajectories, not people of theory. They are people of circularity: beginning, middle, and beginning.

The book is structured into six interconnected chapters: »Sowing words«, »Cities and cosmophobia«, »We are sharers«, »Architecture and countercolonialism«, »Colonialism of submission« and »Creating free, planting fenced«. Through his narrative, Bispo establishes a profound critique of the Western colonial world and its humanism, denouncing the disconnections in the relationships we establish with animals, the forest and other beings. According to the author, »despite being creatures of nature, humans detach themselves from nature and seek to become only its creators. Hence their need to synthesize the organic, to see life as raw materials and to turn nature into money.« It is against this way of life that Bispo disruptively refuses even his own humanity. For him, this refusal implies denying belonging to a species that does not recognise itself as an integral part of nature. As a result of this dissociation between humans and nature, according to the author, we have a cosmophobic society, that is, a society incapable of recognising itself as part of a natural whole and of being respectful towards it.

Continuing the reflections established in *Colonização, quilombos: modos e significações* (2015), the *quilombola* thinker deepens his perspective on decolonial studies, though he does not explicitly engage with existing literature in the field. »Coun-

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tercolonization« is the key concept he developed that has sparked debate both inside and outside academia. For the author, the concept seeks to re-signify, in a prominent place, the cultural matrix of the so-called ›traditional‹ peoples, enunciating their forms of resistance. As he explains, coloniality and decoloniality are aimed at those who, to a greater extent, have been inserted into colonial structures (such as academics, for example). Countercolonisation, in turn, is a theory guided by ›traditional‹ peoples' practices, including indigenous and *quilombolas*. It is therefore located within a theoretical and practical debate, offering tools to examine these communities' modes of resistance to colonisation.

Within its countercolonising project, language occupies a prominent place. And in this point, I believe, lies his great contribution to the reflection on possible imaginaries for a countercolonial legal history.

In his work, the author talks about the importance of the act of »naming« as a (counter)colonial strategy. In a very didactic way, Bispo recounts that, from his experience as an ox trainer, he learned very early about the connections between the mastery of language and the process of colonisation. According to the author, »both the trainer and the colonizer begin by deterritorializing the attacked entity, removing it from its cosmology, distancing it from its sacredness, imposing new ways of life on it and giving it another name« (12). During this process, assigning a new language involves an effort to erase the existing memory in order to create another.

The perception of the colonising power of naming led Antônio Bispo to incorporate the coloniser's naming practice and use it as a strategy of countercolonial resistance (in his words, in a *diversal* way). For the author, engaging in a »war of denominations« becomes imperative: the game of countering certain colonial words as a way of weakening them. In essence, the strategy operates as follows: on the one hand, »take the enemy's words that are powerful and [...] weaken them« and, on the other, »take our words that are weakened and [...] strengthen them« (13).

To better explain it, the author offers an example of the meanings of the denomination of sorcery. If some colonisers call Black religious practices »sor-

cery«, then Bispo suggests embracing this term and re-signifying it. It should be noted, however, that by »sowing« new words – such as countercolonialism, cosmophobia, *diversal* – the author is not just giving new names to things that already exist, but rather proposing new ideas.

In academia, especially in the field of legal studies, the meaning of concepts matters. But what effects of meaning are provoked in our discipline when certain groups intentionally change them? What testimony does the re-signification of vocabulary proposed by countercolonial thinking give us? Of course, it is not a question of creating something totally new (which would be impossible), but of setting in motion a force in the opposite direction to that of colonisation.

In countercolonialism, the countercolonial subject denies their belonging to humanity and denies the coloniser's language, while at the same time appropriating it. The aim is to weaken the colonial hold on language and to strengthen the living and germinating language of countercolonialism; it is a dispossession of language, or rather, a repossession.

If certain normative practices are not considered relevant to the field of legal history, because the concept of law entails a colonial attribution of a legalistic and state-oriented meaning, then Nêgo Bispo also provides a theoretical-methodological tool for a countercolonial approach to the past.

Ultimately, to denominate means »to imagine«. In recent years, there has been a growing recognition on the part of historians and literary scholars of the need to create spaces of imagination to integrate practices and narratives that have been silenced by official discourses. Nêgo Bispo, therefore, is not alone. Whether through the methodology of »critical fabulation« (Mieke Bal), »counter-history« (Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt) or »countercolonialism«, what is being questioned is the violence that still invalidates narratives based on non-dominant epistemic practices.

Unfortunately, Nêgo Bispo died recently. But as long as his germinating words are spread, he will live on. Just as his book is an offering to the earth, this review is a simple praise to the »Black Bishop«.

