

# Anthropology of the South American Lowlands

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Since the first contacts, the 'lowlands' of South America have been defined in a residual way, as the term referred to all the regions that do not belong to the Andes: the immense Amazon, the Chaco, Patagonia and the Atlantic coast. In fact, the lowlands were thought of as a sort of negative image of the picture that Andean societies presented to the conquistadores: like Central America, with its kings and nobles, its numerous armies, its productive surpluses and its monumental constructions, the Andes and its inhabitants offered an exotic image, certainly. But it was also one that was more understandable or, at the very least, easier to identify: the image of a consolidated state, of farming and sedentary peoples, with a certain demographic density, and more familiar to Europeans. Therefore it is not surprising that in trying to understand the peoples who lived east of the Andes, beyond the Piedmont, European observers most often recycled the prejudices, generic categories and stereotypes of savagery or barbarity that were held by the Andean peoples themselves, who thought of the peoples of the lowlands through the reductive prism of the 'Anti', the 'Chuncho' or the 'Chiriguano' – all generic and contemptuous terms, equivalent to our 'savages' or 'barbarians'.

A large part of this imagery of otherness – whose most complete paradigm is perhaps the Jesuit proto-ethnography of José de Acosta (1985 [1590]), or that of Martin Dobrizhoffer (1968 [1784]) – has survived in the observations accumulated by missionaries, naturalists, government officials, adventurers and explorers. During the colonial era and then in the 19th century after the South American Independencies, they entered Native American lands for various reasons and recorded their experiences in writing. In doing so, consciously or unconsciously, these characters became the ancestors of South American lowland anthropology and ethnohistory. However, the canonical opposition between Andean 'civilization' (associated en bloc with complexity and social differentiation, centralization and hierarchy) and lowland 'barbarism' (associated with simplicity, atomization, autarchy or egalitarianism) is not the only prejudice that marked the colonial exegesis of South American otherness. Beyond the recognition of the exuberance of the natural environment and the diversity of the indigenous landscape of the lowlands – linguistic families of a surprising extent, hundreds of languages and an extremely polychrome cultural heritage – the work of the 'classical' ancestors of South American ethnology, such as Erland Nordenskiöld (2001

[1924], 2002 [1910], 2003 [1922]), Karl von den Steinen (1894), Curt Nimuendajú (1987 [1914]) or Alfred Métraux (1930, 1946), shows that other notorious prejudices have persisted to a greater or lesser extent. One thinks of implicit evolutionary theories, explanations by the diffusion of cultural traits, or a certain typological inclination, not to mention certain utopian idealizations: primitive communism, the good savage, the small community, the *Natürvolker* and the ecological indigenous peoples.

Once the institutional professionalization of the discipline of anthropology was consolidated during the first half of the 20th century, particularly in Europe and the United States, thematic sedimentation continued its singular drift. The icon of canonization is undoubtedly the grandiose synthesis imposed by the *Handbook of South American Indians* edited by Julian Steward (1946–1950), with its cultural ecology which recycles thematic keys whose origin could be traced to the Jesuit proto-ethnography: the classification of South America into 'cultural areas', the environment considered as a limiting factor of human adaptation, and the consequent evolutionary levels of social integration. Following the heuristic leap caused, twenty years later, by the cryptic *Mythologiques* of Claude Lévi-Strauss (1964–1971), the construction of the anthropological canon gave rise to a kind of exponential explosion of studies devoted to the lowlands of South America in the last quarter of the twentieth century: a new anthropological imaginary of the lowlands emerged, characterized by ecological diversity but also by the variability of its history and its social, linguistic and ethnic complexity, by the search for synergy between structural and historical explanations and by the preference – more programmatic than real – for interdisciplinary synthesis. In this new landscape, evolutionary, functionalist or structuralist readings have had to learn to coexist with studies of ethnogenesis and ethnicity, with historical anthropology and with the deconstructionist critique of postmodern anthropology, gender studies, postcolonial studies and even the current fashion of the ontological turn, while gradually integrating indigenous scholars themselves, who are increasingly successful in transcending the networks of intercultural intermediation.

Far from the monochromatic and insular reason attributed to essentialisms, and seeking to avoid metonymic explanations that reduce social complexity to mono-causal formulas (the environment, constituent otherness, the state, cosmology), contemporary analysis increasingly calls upon an imagination that imposes the fluid realities of hybridization, crossbreeding or multilingualism. It also seems that the opposition between the lowlands and the highlands as independent, even antagonistic universes belongs to the past. In this unprecedented context, lowland anthropology continues to gain ground in the generalist arena, even daring to rebuild some of the ancient comparative bridges with Central America, North America, Melanesia or North Asia. At the same time, it needs to elucidate its own internal heterogeneity, since Guyana is obviously not the Chaco or Mato Grosso, the Río de la Plata basin or Patagonia. And finally, light remains to be shed on a whole range of epistemological nuances generated by academic geopolitics: the colonial residue in the doctrine of the discipline, or the respective weight of national academies and schools, scientific networks, or even the South American languages themselves in shaping anthropological problems.

In a world of increasing professionalisation and globalisation, which produces an almost excessive bibliography, the research theme 'Anthropology of the Lowlands of South America'

seeks to collectively retrace the process of historical formation of disciplinary lineages, thematic axes and their respective heterodoxies, taking as much interest in the life, work and production contexts of renowned authors as in those of other forgotten or little-known figures in anthropology. Our desire is to reconstruct the most plural genealogy possible of the individuals, networks, trends and institutions that have contributed to shaping our knowledge and current views of the South American lowlands.

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