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CHAPTER 21

Places and Academic Disputes: The Argentine Gran Chaco

Gastón Gordillo

Early in July 1924, tensions were running high in Napalpi, a state-run indigenous settlement in the Argentinean Chaco. Hundreds of Mocoivi and Toba were involved in a millenarian movement that had triggered intense conflicts with settlers and, on July 19, a large police force stormed their main camp, killing between 200 and 300 men, women, and children. This massacre would mark a significant moment in the history of Argentinean anthropology, for various reasons. First, a German-Argentinean ethnographer named Robert Lehmann-Nitsche was doing fieldwork in Napalpi that same month; however, he never wrote a word about these events. The following year, he published an article on “Toba astronomy” based on materials gathered, he mentioned in passing, during “a fifteen-day visit” to Napalpi in July 1924 (1924–25:181). In a disturbing expression of anthropological silencing, the article includes Toba myths about stars but provides no commentary on the massacre or the tense sociopolitical conditions surrounding his fieldwork. Decades later, Napalpi would shape Argentinean anthropology in a different way. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, some of the first attempts to produce more historical accounts of the indigenous groups of the Chaco included analyses of the 1924 massacre.

In this chapter, I analyze the histories behind these contrasting forms of knowledge production and how they have contributed to the making of Argentinean anthropology. I argue that the history of the discipline in Argentina was profoundly linked to the production of the Gran Chaco as its most important, and politically charged, ethnographic site. Certainly, this was not the only region mapped by national academic centers. Yet the Gran Chaco was arguably the main testing ground where the first systematic expressions of sociocultural anthropology, especially at the universities of Buenos Aires and La Plata, defined their identity and character. For many ethnographers, this region best captured the exoticism they projected onto indigenous cultural practice; for others, it was the place that best exemplified the violence and exploitation

that had characterized the experience of indigenous groups in Argentina. This is why, I argue, the Chaco became the battleground of ideological conflicts shaping the local academy. These disputes shed light on some of the political and spatial dynamics of anthropological traditions in Argentina and, more generally, in Latin America; they show that the exoticization of indigenous "others" was challenged from within the discipline from an early stage but also that, in tension with this move, some anthropologists sided with politically reactionary agendas.

My analysis draws on recent approaches to the spatiality of anthropological practice. As authors like Richard Fardon (1990) and Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson (1997) have argued, the history of anthropology has been intrinsically tied to the making of spatially defined patterns of cultural difference. As part of this process, the spatial distance between "the field" and "home" was the precondition for the cultural distance many ethnographers sought to discover in faraway places. In this chapter, I examine how a similar spatial ordering shaped anthropological traditions in a peripheral place such as Argentina, where "the field" and "home" were part of the same national geography. Yet I am also interested in showing how this practice was a multifaceted, contested process of place making.

In the first section, I analyze the factors that set the Chaco apart from Patagonia and the Andean northwest in the Argentinian anthropological imagination. Then, I examine the first wave of anthropological studies conducted in the region by European ethnographers and the rise of diverging anthropological traditions in the 1960s and 1970s, in connection with the political conflicts then transforming Argentina. In the final section, I analyze the new directions taken by Argentinian anthropology in the mid and late 1980s and the geographical and conceptual recon-figurations brought about by these changes.

THE CHACO AT THE TURN OF THE 20TH CENTURY

The Gran Chaco is a wide, mostly semiarid plain that stretches eastward from the last slopes of the Andes to the Paraná and Paraguay rivers, and north from the Pampas to Chiquitos (southeast Bolivia). For centuries, this region was one of the most important indigenous bastions in South America and the Spanish saw it as the epitome of savagery. The recurrent failure of attempts at conquest fostered myriad images of alterity about this region's indigenous groups but also endeavors to document their practices. As elsewhere in the Americas, Jesuit missionaries produced the earliest ethnographic and historical accounts (Paucke 1944; Dobrizhoffer 1970; Lozano 1989), some of which presented the Chaco as a heathen, perfidious geography under the control of the Devil (Lozano 1989).

In the 19th century, the gradual consolidation of an independent Argentinian nation-state created a more secular discourse about the Chaco. This region emerged as an unknown territory waiting to be explored, mapped, and named, and also as a place of huge economic potential (Arenales 1833). European and Argentinian scientific explorers began making journeys into frontier areas, often combining an interest in botany and zoology with ad hoc attempts at surveying anthropological and linguistic differences (D'Orbigny 1835–47). When the final military assault on the Chaco was launched in the 1880s, scientists and surveyors joined many of the army units sweeping the region (Arnaud 1889; see also Fontana 1977; Seelstrang 1977). Science

and violence became part of the same project of conquest, mobilizing a machinery of knowledge production that required not just the military defeat of those populations but also their conversion into objects of study. This was also an attempt to turn older patterns of alterity defined by heathenism and savagery into new forms of difference, now to be read through the lens of concepts such as "race" and "culture."

At the turn of the 20th century, the earlier, largely improvised ethnographic descriptions led to more systematic efforts conducted by academics. Anthropology related studies in Argentina (then closely associated with the natural sciences and paleontology) were based at the Museum of Natural History in Buenos Aires and the Museum of Natural Sciences in La Plata. Francisco Moreno, Florentino Ameghino, Samuel Lafone Quevedo, and Juan Ambrosetti were the dominant figures and the research they conducted and inspired targeted not just the Chaco but also Patagonia and the Andean northwest. The three regions were construed as sources of anthropological knowledge, but this "othering" operated in each of them in different ways. Patagonia was (and continued to be throughout the 20th century) the center of major geopolitical disputes with Chile, and much of the early anthropological work in the region was tied to implicit nationalist agendas. Those concerns were embodied, first, in Ameghino's (quickly discarded) theory that humanity had originated in La Patagonia (and therefore in Argentina) and, later on, in studies on the "Araucanization of the Pampas," through which the expansion of Mapuche (Araucanos) groups across the Andes was read as a "Chilean" invasion of sorts that engulfed "Argentinian Indians" (Lazzari and Lenton 2000). The northwest, meanwhile, would attract archaeological work on pre-Inka agricultural societies, and folklore studies on the blending of indigenous and Hispanic cultural practices.

Within this spatial triad, the Gran Chaco seemed to be culturally and historically more distant from Buenos Aires than the other two. Free of the nationalist narratives that firmly grounded Patagonia within national identities and of the cultural and archaeological sediment left by the relatively "advanced" Andean civilizations of the northwest, the Chaco emerged as the most primitive of the internal frontiers. In short, this was seen as the place whose native population was most radically removed from the modernizing and Europeanized ideal shaping the nation-state. This aura made the region enormously attractive to generations of anthropologists. The Chaco became the territory in Argentina where they sought to fulfill, to borrow from Michel-Ralph Trouillot (1991), the discipline's "savage slot." Yet this was from the outset a challenge that mobilized contrasting intellectual projects, some of which would eventually

THE MAKING AND UNMAKING OF SAVAGERY: THE EARLY DAYS OF CHACO ETHNOGRAPHY

In the 1890s, the first attempt to order the fragmented ethnographic information on the Chaco involved the study of indigenous languages, mostly through already existing sources (e.g. Lafone Quevedo 1898). But scholars began conducting more direct observations soon after. It could be argued that modern Chaco anthropology began at the dawn of the new century with two almost simultaneous, yet strikingly different, events.

In September 1899, the Argentinian government stopped the shipment of 23 Tobo men and women ready to be sent from Buenos Aires to Paris to be exhibited at the

1900 World Fair. Robert Lehmann-Nitsche (1872–1938), the scholar who decades later would silence the Napalpi massacre from his accounts, immediately saw the opportunity to study the distant Chaco in Buenos Aires. Regretting that “the European scientific centers were deprived of the opportunity to make direct observations about one of the most interesting and unknown tribes of South America” (1904:264), he decided to take physical measurements on them before they were returned to the Chaco. Holding a doctorate in physical anthropology, Lehmann-Nitsche had arrived in Argentina from Germany two years earlier to join the La Plata Museum. Refraining these Toba men and women as specimens scrutinized by science, he carefully measured each person’s body. He registered not just their weight and height but also an overwhelming mass of quantitative information on faces, eyes, noses, ears, feet, legs, hands, arms, and skulls. He also photographed each man’s full naked body and each person’s face. “There is no doubt,” he wrote, “about the purity of the race” (1904:266).

This purportedly scientific obsession with nonwhite bodies was certainly widespread at the time and expressed the racialist paradigms that dominated physical anthropology. As in similar measurements conducted elsewhere among “Negroes,” it was apparent that Lehmann-Nitsche was looking for signs of *difference*: i.e. for those markers that would confirm that those bodies were physically distinct from white bodies. The subtext of such a search was that the seemingly obvious cultural difference of the Toba had to have a physical correlate. In his quest for differences and disregard for the relations of power constituting his subjects, Lehmann-Nitsche contributed to setting the tone for future anthropological endeavors that would see the Chaco as the cradle of ontologically different human beings. Almost simultaneously, nonetheless, members of the Swedish aristocracy were setting off to the Chaco on a very different type of anthropological journey.

Led by Baron Erland Nordenskiöld (1877–1932), the Swedish Cordillera-Chaco Expedition of 1901–02 was the first large-scale scientific attempt to study the Chaco and its indigenous population. This expedition gathered information on the geography, zoology, botany, archaeology, and ethnography of a wide region on the Argentinean–Bolivian border, both in the Andes and the Chaco. In contrast to the measurements conducted by Lehmann-Nitsche, Nordenskiöld and his colleagues interacted with indigenous people in their “natural habitat” and made firsthand observations on their social practices. More important, they registered the tense historical conjuncture in which these groups were immersed. The official ethnographer of the expedition was Count Eric von Rosen, who would publish his account about the Chorote over 20 years later (von Rosen 1924). Yet the expedition’s most gifted ethnographer turned out to be Nordenskiöld himself, who was initially the group’s zoologist. Impressed by his experience in the Chaco, he decided to return for a longer period. In 1908–09, Nordenskiöld organized a new expedition that this time forayed along the Pilcomayo river, in an area beyond the control of the Bolivian and Argentinean armies. In a Malinowskian sense, his fieldwork was still rudimentary. He could barely communicate with his informants, did not spend much time in one single village, and much of his energy was focused on the collection of material artifacts for Swedish museums.

Yet Nordenskiöld was a sensitive and keen observer. His 1910 *Indianlif* (The Life of the Indians, published in Swedish and soon translated into German and French)

was a remarkable accomplishment, which captured in a personal prose the experiences of indigenous groups gradually affected by an encroaching capitalist frontier. He described the practices, rituals, forms of social organization, and material culture of several groups, but also their early engagement in wage labor and the conditions of exploitation imposed on them (see 1912:254, 255). Further, his prose is marked by a humanism that avoids an easy exoticization of indigenous practices. Whereas other authors would later on explain indigenous dances in terms of an alleged “fear of evil spirits,” he rightly argued that people danced as entertainment (1912:70–71). The Nivacle, where he emphasized that they were not “novel heroes” but ordinary people with whom, he hoped, readers could sympathize (1912:131).

The tone and content of Nordenskiöld’s writings, however, shifted some years later when he tried to systematize his previous findings based on the diffusionist models popular at the time in continental Europe. The ethnographic richness of his earlier accounts was replaced by a much drier, comparative attempt to chart “lists” of the cultural influences that had constituted Chaco societies. And the previous humanism assumptions of the day about the Chaco as an eminently primitive place, where local groups received their more “advanced” cultural elements (horiculture, weaving, musical instruments) from elsewhere, especially the Andes (1919:267).

Supported and influenced by Nordenskiöld, in 1911–12 another Scandinavian scholar made an inroad into the Chaco: the Finnish ethnographer Rafael Karsten (1879–1956). Holding a doctorate in religious studies, Karsten conducted research roughly in the same region covered by his Swedish predecessors: the Argentinean–Bolivian border. Karsten was the first ethnographer to conduct relatively prolonged, systematic fieldwork in the Chaco and published two major monographs drawing on this experience: *The Toba Indians of the Bolivian Chaco* (of 1923, see Karsten 1970) and *Indian Tribes of the Argentine and Bolivian Chaco* (1932). Even though the latter is clearly his most important work on the Chaco and includes valuable ethnographic data, both books represented a notable break from Nordenskiöld’s humanism. Despite having gone to the Chaco influenced by Nordenskiöld, Karsten was harshly critical of him and dismissed him as a “traveler” and “artifact collector” (1932:17, 31, 108, 201). His primary objection was that Nordenskiöld had overlooked the “religious” and “magical” dimensions of indigenous life. The Finnish ethnographer’s view of “indigenous religion,” however, was particularly rigid and stereotypical. Karsten was among the first to project the image of the “magical thinking savage” onto the Chaco, an image that would haunt Argentinean anthropology for decades. Contrary to Nordenskiöld’s interpretations, face tattooing, dancing, and rituals had for Karsten few mundane or aesthetic dimensions and were designed as protection from “evil spirits.” This analysis, however, was largely speculative and ethnographically thin. It is worth noting that Karsten admitted, on several occasions, that his informants’ explanations were often mundane rather than “magical” or “religious” (e.g. 1970:85; 1932:183).

While these Scandinavian ethnographers aimed their work at a European audience, in Argentina anthropological research on the Chaco was following a different path. First, the discipline was gaining institutional ground. In 1903, an anthropology course (*catáctra*) was established at the Universidad de Buenos Aires (UBA), and the following

year Juan Ambrosetti founded the university's Ethnographic Museum, the first research institution in South America solely centered in the study of human cultures. Robert Lehmann-Nitsche positioned himself as the main Chaco specialist in the country and pursued his physical studies further. Not surprisingly given the conditions of his previous work, in 1905 he measured indigenous bodies at a large sugar plantation, La Esperanza (Jujuy), where thousands of men and women from the Chaco worked every year. His quantitative fixation with nonwhite bodies was similar to that of his previous work on the Toba; but this time he wrote a surprising, if brief, critique of the violence unleashed by the military on these groups. He lamented they were "chased without mercy" for, he argued, they were a "cheap and easy to control" labor force that was crucial for the "wealth of the country" (Lehmann-Nitsche 1907:54).

This criticism of state violence led to a paradoxical twist in Lehmann-Nitsche's career, for he would become one of the first scholars in Argentina to argue that anthropology should advise state policy. At a 1910 conference, he proposed that the state put aside reservations following the United States model, where indigenous people could "live their traditions" while providing "cheap labor" (1915:3-5; see Bilbao 2002). This proposal contributed to the debates that in 1912 led to the creation of Napalpi, the state-run settlement where Toba and Mocoovi were to be taught "work habits." However, Lehmann-Nitsche's future research would not address these issues again. Now as the head of the Anthropology Section at the La Plata Museum, he did more fieldwork in the Chaco and deepened the distancing begun earlier by building, this time, on the image of indigenous people as myth centered. Once again, his chosen field sites were places where indigenous people were socialized into new codes of discipline: the Ledesma plantation (in 1921) and Napalpi (in 1924). His silencing of the Napalpi massacre symbolizes the type of ahistorical representations he was striving for; but this silence can also be read as a political choice, given his previous support for the establishment of such places. By publishing his results in Spanish and in local journals, Lehmann-Nitsche consolidated the first Argentinean based anthropological construction of the Chaco as an eminently different, mysterious place. Even though this view would have a lasting influence in Argentinean anthropology, reemerging with sheer force in the 1970s, the legacy of Nordenskiöld's humanism would temporarily counter this perspective.

Alfred Métraux (1902-1963), arguably the most important Chaco ethnographer of the first half of the 20th century, played a crucial role in this countermove. Born in Switzerland, Métraux spent part of his childhood in the Argentinean province of Mendoza, where his father settled as a doctor (Bilbao 2002:11-13). Trained at the Sorbonne under Paul Rivet and Marcel Mauss, Métraux spent two years at the University of Göttenburg (Sweden) under Nordenskiöld, where he wrote his dissertation (later defended in Paris) on the material culture of the Tupi-Guaraní. In his thesis, Métraux repeatedly praised Nordenskiöld as "my teacher" (1928:viii, 3). His direct interaction with Nordenskiöld proved profoundly influential, both in his interest in the Chaco and the development of a critical humanism that avoided a simplistic exoticization of indigenous practices. In 1928, under the auspices of Rivet, he was appointed director of the newly created Institute of Ethnology at the Universidad de Tucumán, in northwest Argentina. Suspicious of theory and permanently attracted to ethnographic research, Métraux did fieldwork in myriad settings but focused primarily on the Gran Chaco. He worked among the Guaraní of the Bolivian Chaco (in 1929)

and conducted two ethnographic expeditions to the central Chaco, in 1932-33 and 1939, chiefly on the Pilcomayo River.

His 1932-33 expedition was arguably the one that would have a deeper impact on his career. Métraux worked in areas still torn by state violence and was struck by the abuses of the Argentinean military against indigenous people. He was quick to denounce this situation by sending from the field a report to the Société des Américanistes, which published it soon after. The tone of this piece is one of passionate and unequivocal indignation. He denounced the "annihilation" of a "healthy, beautiful race" by "the excrement of civilization": settlers and military officers whose actions were characterized by their "barbarism," "hypocritical evil," and "stupidity" (1933:205). More important, on returning from the field he began denouncing the army's atrocities in the daily *La Nación* and lobbied in Buenos Aires for indigenous rights. As a result, the head of the Honorary Commission of Indian Reservations (Comisión Honoraria de Reducciones de Indios) offered him a post to return to the Pilcomayo and assess the situation (Bilbao 2002:78-79). Yet facing threats by army officers deployed in the area, Métraux decided not to take the job. With little research funding and facing delays in his salary because of the impact of the 1930s Depression, he decided to leave Argentina. In December 1933, he left for Europe and later moved to the United States (Bilbao 2002:80).

While based at the Bishop Museum in Hawaii, Métraux systematized some of his field materials and published his most accomplished ethnographic account of a Chaco group, his "Études d'ethnographie Toba-Pilaga" (1937). This piece confirmed, first, Nordenskiöld's influence on his work. Right from the start, the narrative situated his depiction of indigenous life - including shamanism, ritual, political organization, warfare, and festivities - regularly made reference to new historical forces such as the labor migration to sugar plantations or the recent Anglican missionization. His ethnography, at the same time, was superior to Nordenskiöld's: his prose is more analytical and his understanding of indigenous culture subtler. This piece is also significant because Métraux made clear from the outset his critical stance toward Karsten's speculative interpretations. His dismissal of the Finnish ethnographer was swift: "his works are not only light and superficial, but are also full of errors and ridiculous nonsense" (1937:173).

Because his departure from Argentina had been relatively abrupt, Métraux sought to conduct a new expedition to the Chaco to complete his previous findings. In 1939, with a grant from the Guggenheim Foundation, he returned to the Pilcomayo for several months. Even though back in the United States he engaged in other research projects, he continued publishing materials on the Chaco. The most important piece was his "Ethnography of the Chaco" (1946), published in the *Handbook of South American Indians* edited by Julian Steward. This was the most ambitious effort to date to systematize the growing yet scattered information available on this region's indigenous populations. Descriptive in nature and comprehensive in scope, his predecessors. Even though hailing Nordenskiöld, this time he also criticized his speculative diffusionist interpretations (1946:211). Furthermore, he renewed his criticism in mind: "Chaco Indians do not actually live in the constant fear of spirits that some authors have ascribed to them" (1946:352).

Despite his historical sensitivity and his commitment to the rights of indigenous people, Métraux was in many ways the epitome of the mid-20th century ethnographer, primarily interested in topics such as mythology and shamanism. Issues of social and culture change were not relevant to his analysis, for he firmly believed that such changes would lead to the “disappearance” and “destruction” of indigenous cultures (1946:205). However, his work would leave a mark on Argentinean anthropologists interested in accounting for the historical forces transforming the Chaco.

INSTITUTIONALIZATION AND THE CHALLENGES OF “SOCIAL CHANGE”

Métraux's work at the Institute of Ethnology in Tucumán influenced a man who would become one of the foremost figures in Argentinean anthropology: Enrique Palavecino (1900–1966), the first Chaco ethnographer born in Argentina. Beginning in 1927, he conducted numerous (if mostly brief) ethnographic trips to the Gran Chaco and played an important role in the institutionalization of the discipline. He directed the Institute at the Universidad de Tucumán, contributed to the creation of the Department of Anthropology at UBA in 1958, and directed the UBA Ethnographic Museum. With Métraux working abroad, Palavecino became for several decades the most prominent Chaco specialist in Argentina. For this reason, his work was more shaped by the political events in the country than that of his European predecessors.

Initially, Palavecino's writings were largely descriptive and tackled some of the same practices (shamanism, body decoration, mythology, subsistence) that had interested the previous generation of ethnographers (see Palavecino 1933, 1935). Yet following Métraux's legacy, Palavecino became increasingly concerned with the critical role that anthropology could play in state policy. In 1934, when he was affiliated with the Museum of Natural History, he participated in a study that anticipated this concern. A businessman had brought a group of Wichí to Buenos Aires to be displayed at an exhibit. The Comisión de Reducciones de Indios intervened to stop the exhibit, but granted researchers at the museum permission to “study” the Wichí prior to their return to the Chaco. The research team was led by José Imbelloni, Palavecino's director at the museum and a rising anthropological figure due to his work on diffusionism in the Americas. Imbelloni took physical measurements and made masks molded on the faces of the Wichí, while Palavecino wrote notes on “language, mythology, and magic” (1935:78). Whereas in 1899 Lehmann-Nitsche had lamented that the Toba he measured were not sent to Paris for further studies, Palavecino was critical of the shipment of the Wichí to Buenos Aires. More importantly, he personally took them back to the Chaco, pursuing an academic practice that was more closely tied to state policies aimed at “protecting” them.

As anthropology was gaining more visibility in state circles, the political constraints on academic practice were also becoming more evident. The rise of Peronism in the mid-1940s, in fact, set Imbelloni's and Palavecino's careers apart. The first two presidencies of Juan Domingo Perón (1946 to 1955) favored those intellectuals deemed close to the official nationalist ideology, which celebrated a “national character” based on the blending of criollos and European immigrants. Palavecino was not well regarded by Peronist functionaries and was removed from the directorship of the

Institute of Ethnology in Tucumán. Imbelloni, who had well-known sympathies for European fascism, became the dominant figure of Argentinean anthropology. Those were the golden days of diffusionist theory in Argentina, championed by Imbelloni and strengthened by the arrival of European scholars after the Second World War, most notably Oswald Menghin. As the measurements conducted on the Wichí illness rate, Imbelloni saw the Chaco as a distant geography that he dissected from Buenos Aires, mostly through studies on physical anthropology, archaeology, and linguistics aimed at sketching the origin of some of the region's cultural features.

The 1955 military coup against Perón undermined the dominance of this intellectual tradition, forced Imbelloni out of the university, and allowed the return of scholars previously censored by Peronism, among them Palavecino (Perazzi 2003:78). When the Department of Anthropology at UBA was created in 1958, Palavecino positioned himself as one of the dominant figures. Under the new ideology of *desarrollismo* (“developmentalism”), epitomized by Arturo Frondizi's presidency (1958 to 1961), Palavecino's earlier interest in state policy led him to write what would become the first anthropological analysis of social change in the Chaco. In a 1959 article, he analyzed the transformations affecting indigenous groups and argued that their alleged “incompatibility” with the national society was not caused by their “racial incapacity” but by the “inadequate treatment” imposed on them (Palavecino 1958–59:389). He also made a call for a “rational state policy” and argued that anthropology had an important role to play, for an “adequate treatment” of these people required “a profound knowledge of native culture” (1958–59:380, 389).

Yet Palavecino had to compete with a rising star in the Department of Anthropology who had a very different agenda: a young, charismatic professor named Marcelo Bórmida (1925–1978). Born in Italy and initially trained in the natural sciences, Bórmida had migrated to Argentina after the Second World War and became a disciple of Imbelloni. For over a decade, he conducted research in archaeology, physical anthropology, and comparative ethnology but by the late 1950s was shifting his interests toward ethnography. With the decline of Imbelloni's star, Bórmida continued at UBA, and deepened the radical distancing of indigenous people that had been initiated by Lehmann-Nitsche. In this regard, Bórmida's differences with Palavecino had profound ideological connotations. Building on the legacy of politically conservative academic traditions in Argentina, he rejected any anthropology committed to the pragmatics of social change and, in turn, began advocating a hermeneutic of “the archaic mentality.”

The influence of Palavecino and Bórmida on new generations of ethnographers, among other factors, would contribute to fracturing Argentinean anthropology for the next two decades. Even though these competing intellectual traditions were forged in offices, classrooms, and libraries in Buenos Aires, they grounded their identity elsewhere: primarily, in the Gran Chaco. The latter emerged as a contested terrain over which a now-institutionalized anthropology molded its contours.

HISTORY, POWER, AND RESISTANCE: THE DE-EXOTICIZATION OF THE CHACO

The 1960s were years of increasing political polarization in Argentina, marked by the proscription of Peronism, the radicalization of popular organizations (boosted by

the 1959 triumph of the Cuban Revolution), and new military coups in 1961 and 1966. Some of the first anthropology graduates (*licenciados*) at UBA began conducting research in the Chaco clearly influenced by this context. Argentinian anthropologists trained in the United States joined this trend. Despite their differences, these scholars were all interested in accounting for the historical forces that had constituted the Chaco at the time of their fieldwork. Their concern for history, in this regard, was deeper than the one we find in Nordenskiöld and Métraux. These two authors had included historical information in their accounts to illustrate the conditions of their ethnographic present; but they were still interested, primarily, in representing indigenous cultures as they had existed prior to their incorporation into the nation-state. In the 1960s, by contrast, ethnographers were keen to analyze the impact of historical forces on the organization and identities of these groups, following a shift also gaining momentum in anthropology in the United States, Great Britain, and France. These interests paralleled the attempt by government agencies to address pressing issues of poverty and inequality, and this confluence between anthropology and state policy was symbolized by the work of Edgardo Corderu and Esther Hermitte.

In 1963, Edgardo Corderu, one of the first anthropology graduates at UBA, was hired by the Comisión del Río Bermejo (Bermejo River Commission) to assess the social situation of a Toba village to be affected by an ambitious (but never implemented) canalization project of the Bermejo river. The report submitted by Corderu (1967) became the first in-depth ethnographic study of culture change in the Chaco. Shortly after, in 1969, the Chaco provincial government hired Esther Hermitte to conduct research on the social conditions of indigenous people in order to evaluate how to "integrate" them into "national society." Hermitte had obtained her Ph.D. in anthropology at the University of Chicago and was based at the Instituto di Tella in Buenos Aires. Leading an interdisciplinary team, in 1970 she and three other anthropologists conducted fieldwork in four indigenous settlements.

A common feature of the reports by Corderu and by the team led by Hermitte is that they showed that indigenous groups had been deeply transformed by agrarian capitalism and state interventions. Hermitte's team in particular criticized the concept of "integration" for presupposing that these groups were not already part of the regional political economy (1995:97, 181). Both reports, nevertheless, included significant conceptual differences. Corderu paid considerable attention to the Toba's cultural and religious experience, an interest that would shape his future research. The team led by Hermitte (1995:57, 227-229), in contrast, had a predominantly socio-economic approach and was arguably the first anthropological analysis in the Chaco influenced by Marxism, even if that influence was not made explicit.

The Gran Chaco was being constructed as a place quite different from what earlier generations of ethnographers had imagined. No longer defined by a taken-for-granted distance from the nation's center, the region was now seen as the product of new historical forces. This view did not go unchallenged, as we shall see, but it revealed that a new generation of anthropologists defined their identity as intellectuals committed to social change and to building bridges between regions previously viewed as essentially different. The Chaco began to be de-exoticized in further ways. Some ethnographers conducted fieldwork in indigenous urban settlements, in which people lived as a marginalized labor force. This included Esther Hermitte's 1970 fieldwork in Resistencia (the capital of the province of Chaco) and also the work of Leopoldo

Barrolomé, an Argentinian graduate student at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. Barrolomé conducted fieldwork in Sáenz Peña (province of Chaco) and wrote an article on Toba leadership, where he criticized any attempt at analyzing indigenous leaders without examining these men's close interconnection with state agencies (Barrolomé 1971).

Of the authors mentioned above, Corderu was the only one who continued building his academic career through long-term research in the Chaco. For a few years, he continued examining the intersections of history and culture and, together with Alejandra Siffredi (another UBA graduate), tackled one of the most significant yet silenced events in recent Chaco history: the 1924 Napalpí massacre. Corderu and Siffredi were not alone in this endeavor. Elmer Miller, an American anthropologist and former Mennonite missionary who conducted research among the Toba in the 1960s, based much of his 1967 dissertation at the University of Pittsburgh on the massacre, especially as it related to the subsequent rise of Toba Pentecostal churches (see Miller 1979). Corderu met Miller in Buenos Aires in 1966 and relied heavily on his work. As part of his M.A. research, Leopoldo Barrolomé (1972) also worked on the events in Napalpí and published a historical analysis of millenarian movements in the Chaco. However, Napalpí gained visibility in academic and public circles especially through Corderu's and Siffredi's 1971 book on that particular topic. That by 1972 several anthropologists had analyzed, within just a few years, the 1924 massacre is significant of the growing historical concerns shaping Chaco ethnography and of the break with the previous academic silencing of state violence.

Yet while these authors were pushing for historical perspectives in anthropology, Marcelo Bórnida was actively forging a school in radical opposition to them. By the mid-1960s, he had consolidated his power as the dominant anthropological figure at UBA. This clout gave him the upper hand in the academic struggle over competing representations of the Chaco. After all, many of the anthropologists advocating theoretical approaches – Hermitte, Barrolomé, and Miller – worked outside major Argentinian universities and had little influence in the training of new graduates. Corderu and Siffredi, for their part, had junior positions at UBA and worked under Bórnida. Not surprisingly, Corderu and Siffredi (1971:164) concluded their book on Napalpí by citing Bórnida at length on the opposition between "mythical" and "rational" thinking. As Argentina's official political landscape was becoming increasingly hostile to research suspected of "leftist leanings," and as Bórnida's influence over anthropology was becoming deeper, the wave of historical studies conducted in the 1960s and early 1970s receded into a silenced background. The days of the mythical savage of the Chaco began.

THE MYTHICAL SAVAGE: THE RISE AND FALL OF PHENOMENOLOGICAL ETHNOLOGY

In the heated and increasingly violent political environment of the 1970s, Bórnida's rising stardom was the academic expression of the backlash against revolutionary activism then brewing in Argentina. In 1969, Bórnida had conducted his first fieldwork in the Chaco and had published the first sketches of what he would call "phenomenological ethnology." And in the early 1970s he conducted further fieldwork,

this time among the Ayoreo of the northern Chaco. Yet the brief democratic spring of 1973 forced Bórnida to leave UBA and create the private research institute that would be the trademark of his school: the Centro Argentino de Etnología Americana (CAEA, Argentinean Center of American Ethnology). In 1973, he began publishing *Scripta Ethnologica*, CAEA's flagship journal. The 1975 intervention of the university and especially the 1976 military coup, which began the most systematic campaign of state terrorism in Argentinean history, enabled Bórnida to return to UBA and strengthen his influence. Under a military dictatorship friendly to "apolitical" forms of ethnographic research, he controlled the Department of Anthropology and most of the anthropology grants from the federal agency for research funding (CONICET). Meanwhile, some of the anthropologists who had pursued socially committed work were sent to jail and tortured. Those who managed to escape physical repression and did not leave the country were based at institutions with relatively low visibility: Hermitte at IDES (Instituto de Desarrollo Económico y Social, a private institute in Buenos Aires) and Barolomé at the Universidad Nacional de Misiones, in the country's northeast (see Guber and Visacovsky 2000). Continuing with a research shift they had begun prior to the 1976 coup, Corderu and Siffredi remained at UBA but put aside their previous historical interests and focused much of their work on mythology (Corderu 1974; Siffredi 1976; Corderu and Siffredi 1978).

The political context in which phenomenological ethnology arose, with few spaces for ideological or theoretical dissent, contributed to this school's tight hegemony at UBA throughout the mid and late 1970s. Yet the rise of Bórnida's phenomenology was also grounded in its conceptual appeal, for this was the first attempt in Argentina to create a distinctive approach to ethnographic research. Most of the previous anthropological work conducted in the country was either descriptive or followed theoretical concepts produced elsewhere. The exception had been Imbelloni, but his cultural and historical analyses did not include a call for ethnographic research. Bórnida's ultimate goal, in contrast, was to reinvent ethnography. Drawing on Imbelloni's "Americanist" concerns, he also aimed to expand his research beyond Argentina. This partially explains why some followers of phenomenological ethnology conducted fieldwork in the Paraguayan and Bolivian Chaco (Bórnida and Califano) and even the Bolivian and Peruvian Amazon (Califano).

Yet Bórnida's ethnology faced a profound paradox: it was based on a repudiation of theory and, hence, on a self-detaching denial that its phenomenology included theoretical assumptions. Following Husserl, Bórnida argued that the ethnographer's primary task was to leave behind, "bracket" any theoretical preconception that may "distort" ethnographic data (1976:78–79). For Bórnida, concepts such as "kinship," "social relations," or "the economy" were rationalized, Western distortions that pulled the ethnographer away from native cosmologies. He wrote: "The ethnographic culture, formalized and atomized by traditional ethnological concepts and categories, is not a living cultural fact but a corpse to which sociological integrationism gives a fictitious and conventional life" (1976:54). The "corpse" produced by anthropological concepts, in short, had for him nothing in common with the native's cultural apprehension of the world. Drawing on German antipositivism and thinkers such as Benedetto Croce and Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, Bórnida (1976:141) claimed that mythology was the natural cradle of cultural meanings and hence the most important focus of anthropological research.

Bórnida chose the Chaco as the laboratory to pursue this model and, in just a few years, the number of ethnographers working under him multiplied. With an esprit de corps distinctive of groups led by a strong, charismatic figure, researchers such as Mario Califano, José Braunstein, Anaíde Idoyaga Molina, Celia Mashnshnek, Miguel de los Ríos, and Alfredo Tomasi (among others) went to the field following Bórnida's ideas and focused most of their initial work on mythology. Yet these authors' production could not help but be defined by their own assumptions about culture and myth, which made them trip over recurring contradictions. For instance, writing about the Ayoreo, Bórnida wrote that their myths lose "coherence" when they are "forced" into organized ensembles that do not exist in the indigenous mind (1974:42); however, in the same piece, he organized Ayoreo myths into different subgroupings, following criteria that are clearly his own (1974:62). Similarly, Bórnida recurrently referred to the "potency" of mythical beings and material items despite acknowledging that the Ayoreo lack any such concept (1975:74, 127). This use of "rationalist" constructs is particularly apparent in his book on the Ayoreo, coauthored with Mario Califano, which is organized along the same categories Bórnida had dismissed as creating a "corpse": "the economy," "social organization," "political organization," and "religion" (Bórnida and Califano 1978).

These authors' assumptions shaped their research in other, more clearly ideological aspects. In sharp contrast to the socially committed anthropology advocated by Palavecino or Hermitte, Bórnida wrote against any type of involvement with the people under study. For him, avoiding preconceptions implied putting aside "pragmatic" concerns such as "the betterment of a group's living conditions" (1976:44–45). This call for a disengaged anthropology was part of a broader conservative agenda committed to erasing history and power relations from ethnographic accounts. Since the primary goal of phenomenological ethnology was to account for permanent mythical structures "independent of space and time" (Bórnida 1969:47), issues such as state violence, wage labor, or missionization were silenced for the sake of reaching for a mythical consciousness impervious to such forces. Paradoxically, this radically ahistorical approach created the corpse Bórnida was striving to move away from: an alleged culture secluded in rigid narratives kept separate from everyday, historical practice.

This production of a timeless, mythic imaginary about the Chaco was at its peak when in 1978, and quite suddenly, Bórnida passed away. Phenomenological ethnology lost its charismatic founder and Mario Califano emerged as the school's leading figure, both at CAEA and UBA. However, some members of the school were beginning to stretch Bórnida's model beyond its self-proclaimed limits. In a 1978 article on mythology, for instance, Corderu and Siffredi (1978:160) subtly criticized Bórnida's rejection of ethnological concepts and made a call for a theoretically grounded phenomenology. This break became more explicit in a 1982 piece that Corderu coauthored with Miguel de los Ríos, in which he openly criticized Bórnida's essentialist and rigid approach to culture (Corderu and de los Ríos 1982:148–149, nn. 37, 39). Published the same year the dictatorship began to crumble following the defeat in the Malvinas (Falklands) War, this article repositioned Corderu, together with Siffredi, as the leading reformer of Chaco ethnography. By then, even some of Bórnida's staunchest supporters were expressing doubts. In 1983, José Braunstein published a book on "social organization" and "kinship" in the Chaco that contradicted Bórnida's rejection of such concepts; hence he wrote an apologetic preface trying to explain why his book would not contradict his

"esteemed teacher" (1983:13). While remaining loyal to Bórmida's legacy, in the following decade Braunstein nevertheless embarked on research about ethnic boundaries that moved him further away from phenomenology.

By the early 1980s, therefore, the hegemony of phenomenological ethnology was showing cracks and the end of the military dictatorship in December 1983 caused this movement's collapse at UBA. Yet the memory and influence of darker times lingered.

BÓRMIDA'S GHOST: CHACO SCHOLARSHIP IN THE MID AND LATE 1980s

In 1984, social anthropologists who had been exiled or had been working in private institutes returned to UBA. Accused of gaining their teaching positions under the dictatorship, Califano and Braunstein were forced to leave the university. Anchored in the CAEA, phenomenological ethnology became a marginal, self-enclosed group whose remaining members (especially Califano, Idoyaga Molina, and Mashshnek) continued doing research abiding by Bórmida's ideas. Yet the momentum in the discipline had clearly moved elsewhere, conceptually and geographically.

The end of the dictatorship marked the return of a social anthropology that, born in the struggles of the 1960s, had sought to break with the "savage slot" assigned to the discipline. Thus, in the mid and late 1980s there was a dramatic increase in research conducted in urban areas and among non-indigenous rural dwellers. Because of the legacy of the dictatorship, many considered that doing research among Chaco indigenous groups was synonymous with doing "right-wing anthropology." Highlighting the weight of spatialized forms of academic production, for some anthropologists a politically progressive discipline had to be grounded *elsewhere*, in less charged places. Yet this distancing showed how strong the essentialization of the region had become in the 1970s, even among those critical of essentialism. By implying that the Chaco should be avoided as a subject of research, this perspective reproduced the idea that historical analyses did not belong there and that the region should be left to the remnants of the old phenomenological guard. Paradoxically, this erased the historical studies conducted in the Chaco in the 1960s and early 1970s, which included central referents for new generations of social anthropologists, such as Leopoldo Bartolomé and Esther Hermite.

As part of the post-dictatorship reconfiguration of the anthropological academy, Corderu and Siffredi became the most important figures in Chaco ethnography. It is worth noting that, by them, both were working in the Paraguayan Chaco: Siffredi among the Nivaclé and Corderu among the Ishir (Chamacoco), reproducing the transnational reach of UBA begun the previous decade. Yet in the 1980s their practice was paradoxical, for it showed the lingering, if indirect, legacy of phenomenological ethnology. Even though Corderu and Siffredi challenged Bórmida's naive empiricism and produced theoretically sophisticated symbolic analyses, they reproduced his central epistemological tenet: that mythology (as opposed to everyday practice) is the key to understanding indigenous cultures and that mythical narratives can be examined without accounting for the historical forces shaping the informants' subjectivity.

This is particularly apparent in Corderu. Whereas in the 1960s he had contributed to building an anthropology sensitive to history, in the 1980s he replaced those questions

with cultural analyses detached from historical experiences (e.g. Corderu 1984). It was only in a 1989 article that he examined the "ethnic disarticulation" affecting the Ishir, acknowledging his previous disregard for this topic (1989:546). Siffredi's research followed a slightly different, more eclectic and eventually more historical path. In the early and mid 1980s, her work was still centered on history-free mythological analyses (e.g. Siffredi 1984). However, more in tune with the new historical mood at UBA, by the late 1980s she was drawing on systems theory to study situations of "interethnic fiction" (Siffredi 1989). In conjunction with Elmer Miller (whose 1979 book on Toba Pentecostalism reached wide circulation in Argentina), Corderu and Siffredi influenced new generations of ethnographers interested in symbolic anthropology, social organization, and religious syncretism (see Baria 1986; Wright 1983, 1988).

Meanwhile, the mid-1980s also marked the return of openly historical perspectives in Chaco scholarship. Former ethnographer-turned-historian Nicolás Imigo Carerra (1984), who had been part of Hermite's 1970 team, published an influential book on the role of violence in the proletarianization of indigenous groups, which became the first openly Marxist approach to the analysis of Chaco native people. The renewed interest in history and political economy fostered new studies on seasonal labor migrations, subsistence practices, and the making of ethnic identities. These studies helped bridge the gap between the research conducted in the Chaco and the social anthropology now hegemonic at UBA (see, for instance, Carrasco 1989; Trinchero and Maranta 1987; Mendoza and Gordillo 1989).

In the 1990s, this type of work and a new wave of studies on ethnicity and religious syncretism experienced an enormous expansion. The resulting body of work is so diverse and rich that it deserves an article of its own. Hence, my relatively arbitrary decision to end this analysis in 1989. But a defining feature of the post-dictatorship Chaco ethnography is the weight of the intellectual scars left by the military regime and, in particular, by phenomenological ethnology. The studies produced in the mid and late 1980s were haunted by tacit or explicit efforts to move away from Bórmida: by incorporating cultural theory and/or by accounting for history and power relations. In this regard, no other figure in Argentinian anthropology stirred as much controversy and was as influential as Bórmida, even if that influence can be measured mostly negatively: that is, as attempts to break away from him. For this reason, his legacy goes beyond Chaco ethnography. After all, the mostly urban based social anthropology that consolidated its clout in the 1980s defined Bórmida as its negative alter ego, as the symbol of the type of work that should *not* be done, even if this phantom legacy was rarely acknowledged openly. This is why the influence of ethnographic productions on the Chaco is not limited to scholarship on the region but has shaped Argentinian anthropology as a whole. By the late 1980s, only a small fraction of anthropologists in the country worked in the Gran Chaco. But this spatial diversification had a lot to do with the heated prominence of this region among prior generations.

CONCLUSION

Several authors have argued that the history of anthropology has been characterized by a recurrent tension between historico-materialist and culturalist approaches (Ortner 1984; Roseberry 1989). The ethnography of the Chaco is no exception, even if this

tension includes many gray areas that cannot be reduced to neatly bounded dichotomies. In this chapter, I have tried to illustrate how these multifaceted tensions were played out in the academic production of a particularly charged geography. Yet I have also tried to show that these rival intellectual camps, rather than being the result of two separate blocks clashing with each other, were often part of loosely defined threads that were at points closely intertwined. Both Lehmann-Nitsche and Métraux, for instance, made calls to stop state violence, but their responses to the actual violence affecting their research subjects were strikingly different. Likewise, both Palavecino and Borrnida worked under Imbelloni but then pursued opposite agendas. Palavecino carried forward the legacy of Métraux and Nordenskiöld; Borrnida, breaking with it, developed in turn the cultural distancing fostered by Lehmann-Nitsche and Imbelloni.

These shifting ethnographic representations were, as we have seen, closely related to the political struggles transforming the country. The tight connection between knowledge production, politics, and state policy is certainly not exclusive to Latin America. But to a larger degree than in the so-called liberal democracies of western Europe and North America, anthropologists in Argentina lost their jobs, went into internal or external exile, and in some cases were jailed because of their ideological allegiances. Beginning overtly with the Peronist and anti-Peronist governments of the 1940s and 1950s, ideological discrimination became particularly swift during the 1966–73 and 1976–83 dictatorships. Yet the repression of a critical anthropology advocating change was also parallel to the rise of right-wing counterparts. The case of Argentina confirms that progressiveness is not a natural anthropological trademark and that conservative ideologies can have close correlates in the discipline, especially under authoritarian regimes.

The contestations shaping Argentinean anthropology also illustrate that academic forms of place production are central to disciplinary identities. Ethnographers, by definition, ground their practice in particular geographies. And the selection of field sites is never random but follows assumptions about the type of places that would best suit one's research questions. In Argentina, most of the men and women who played a central role in the history of anthropology grounded their questions, at one point or another, in the Gran Chaco. As the last indigenous bastion in the country, this region evoked intense, contradictory meanings for a discipline charged with the task of understanding and disentangling the nation's internal frontiers. Ethnographers produced and inscribed those meanings on the academic mapping of the region, informing the research of subsequent generations of anthropologists who in turn internalized, reformulated, or challenged those imaginings. It was especially in this geography that some of the most important traditions in Argentinean anthropology were to forge, and fight over, their identity. In doing so, ethnographers produced this region as a distinctive place; and this place, in turn, shaped them as particular types of anthropologists.

NOTE

I presented an earlier, longer version of this chapter at the Workshop on the History of Argentinean Anthropology held in July 2004 at IDES (Instituto de Desarrollo Económico y Social),

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