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Edgardo Krebs

José Braunstein

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The Renewal of Gran Chaco Studies

Edgardo Krebs¹ and Jose Braunstein²

Interest in the Gran Chaco among social scientists during most of the 20th century has not been high. In comparison to the Amazon, or the Andes, this enormous territory, over 500,000 square miles, has inspired a modest output of scholarly studies, its very existence as a distinct and important ecological and ethnographic area seemingly lost in the shadows of the other two neighboring giants. Its vast dry plains—"a park land with patches of hardwoods intermingled with grasslands"³—is the second largest biome in South America, after the Amazon. It is shared by four countries, Paraguay, Bolivia, Brazil and Argentina; and in all of them it represents pockets of wilderness coming under the increasing stress of demographic expansion and economic exploitation. In all of these countries the Chaco is also an ethnographic frontier, still open after centuries of contact, and still the refuge of last resort of a few elusive Indian groups.

The comparative neglect of the Gran Chaco as an area of interest for anthropologists is also remarkable considering that the Provincia Paraguaria of the Jesuit order yielded a number of Chaco ethnographies extraordinary in their narrative complexity and analytical edge, and that, closer in time to us, one of the pioneers of modern fieldwork, Guido Boggiani (1861–1902), died tragically in the Chaco, during the course of an expedition. His ethnographies on the Chamacoco and the Caduveo are classics of the discipline, comparable to those written by Baldwin Spencer and W.H.R. Rivers.⁴

During the last fifteen years, however, things have begun to change. A number of international meetings were organized, all dealing with different aspects of the anthropology, history and ethnohistory of the Gran Chaco. Among them, a seminar at the Smithsonian, in 1996, was perhaps the first convened to gather ethnographers from a number of countries working in several areas of the Gran Chaco. This was followed by a seminar at the University of St. Andrews, Scotland in 1999, where the theme was the relationship between Indians, missionaries and the nation-states. Starting in 2002, the International Congress of Regional History of the Gran Chaco, held at the city of Resistencia, Chaco Province, Argentina, has included a symposium on the anthropology of the area. Notable also was a meeting held in Santa Cruz de la Sierra, Bolivia, in 2005, to discuss "Ethnic definitions, social organization and political strategies in the Chiquitania and Chaco." Some of these meetings resulted in publications, which contributed to a growing specialized literature on the subject. The purpose of this article is to review a number of these recent publications produced in the last ten years, emphasizing a few of them. The list is of course arbitrary. It includes only a selection of books and theses, and a couple of films, enough to give an idea of

¹ National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institution.

² Consejo Nacional de Investigaciones Científicas y Técnicas, Argentina.

³ E.H. Bucher and P.C. Huszar, "Sustainable management of the Gran Chaco of South America: Ecological promise and economic constraints," *Journal of Environmental Management*, Vol. 57, Issue 2, October 1999, 99-108.

⁴ Unlike his British colleagues, Boggiani did not come to anthropology from biology or medicine. He was originally a painter. Also unlike them, Boggiani has had very few studies dedicated to him and his work in English (or French or German), perhaps because his ethnographies are rare in Italian and have not been translated.

the scope of the research being done. Obviously a list of articles in scholarly journals could also be compiled, but that task, aside from making a similar point, would exceed our possibilities here.

The Gran Chaco is an area where a recurrent idea of ecological unity goes hand in hand with an astonishing ethnic diversity, a kaleidoscope of fifty-odd discrete social units, speaking around twenty different languages. Since the beginning of the 20th century the study of these indigenous groups has been beset by inescapable difficulties: military defeat, incorporation in a market economy, the emergence and influence of Pentecostal Christianity, the activities of conservation NGOs whose definitions of “nature” are frequently at odds with those held by the Indians themselves and, more recently, the potential or actual effects of a number of legislative changes at the national and provincial level. These changes reflect a tension between granting increasing autonomy to indigenous groups and the resistance to any advance in that direction, and also pose serious juridical challenges of interpretation regarding entire bodies of customary law, and how they may function within the larger framework of national legal systems.

Because of the relative obscurity of the Gran Chaco as a field of studies, the publication of old primary sources is an important endeavor, and any new scholarly edition of a forgotten classic is especially valuable. Two books in this category should be noted. First, Felix de Azara’s “*Voyages dans l’Amerique meridionale, 1781-1801*” (2009, see full citation below). Some readers will be familiar with Azara’s name through Darwin, who relied on his book for firsthand information on the birds and mammals of Paraguay and the River Plate. But as the editor of the volume, Nicolas Richard, reminds us in his long introductory essay, Azara was a functionary in the court of Charles III, the Bourbon King of Spain, and his appointment was highly political, tied to the overall project of reform of the administration in the colonies pursued by that sovereign. More precisely, the main two tasks assigned to Azara, a military officer and engineer, were first to survey the frontier between the Portuguese possessions in Southern Brazil, and those of the Viceroyalty of the River Plate in what is today Paraguayan and Argentine territory; and second to provide arguments that would justify one of the most daring and complicated political decisions of Charles III—the expulsion of the Jesuit Order from all his dominions. Richard is sympathetic towards Azara’s arguments, perhaps the single weak point in his otherwise very thoughtful and erudite essay. In his words, Azara’s work “marks the emergence, in colonial America, of a post-Jesuit anthropology” and his arguments against the Order “maintain intact, today, their power and relevance” (p. xxv). This is a bold statement. It is imposible to compare the sketchy information provided by Azara on the Indians of the Gran Chaco with the full ethnographies written by Dobrizzhofer on the Abipones, Paucke on the Mocovi, and Nicolas del Techo and Jose Manuel Peramas on the Paraguayan missions—to cite just the more prominent examples. Certainly these texts were unknown to Azara, as they would be written in exile by their Jesuit authors, but today the secondary literature on the catalog of Jesuit ethnographies is reviewed favorably by scholars. Moreover, according to Juan Francisco de Aguirre, who accompanied Azara on some of his travels, he derived his ethnographic information from Father Juan Francisco Amancio Gonzalez y Escobar, a Franciscan friar posted in the Paraguayan Chaco. The

Franciscans were put in charge of replacing the Jesuits in Paraguay, and their view of the empire the rival order had built there was inimical, to put it mildly. In any case, the merits of the introduction rest on how Richard places Azara's book in historical context, reconstructing the hazardous trajectory that led to its publication. This happened in Paris, and in French, in 1808, mostly through the combined efforts of Charles A. Walckenaer, the editor, and Azara's brother, then Spanish Ambassador to France. Walckenaer, as Richard notes, was a member of the *Societe des Observateurs de l'Homme*, "together with Cuvier, Lacepede, Gerando, Jussieu and Bouganville" (p. xiii), and the publisher of an ambitious collection of travel literature *Histoire generale des voyages* (21 vols., 1826-1831). Juan Nicolas de Azara was a central player in the complicated diplomatic efforts mounted to expell the Jesuits. A former Spanish ambassador to Rome, with close ties to the Vatican and Pope Pius VI, a collector of classical antiquities, Azara, once in Paris, also developed a good relationship with Napoleon.⁵ Considering the backdrop of political intrigue that surrounded the publication of Azara's hard-won knowledge (he spent over 20 years in the Viceroyalty of the River Plate), and the complications of what Richard calls the "geometries" of the manuscript's history,⁶ it is inevitable to see this text as part of an information and propaganda war that, at the end of the 18th century, also included the Chaco frontier.⁷ However, just a few years later, at the turn of the century, after the Spanish colonies became independent, Azara's work was appropriated by the Criollo elite of Paraguay, and also by Bernardino Rivadavia, the first president of Argentina, who himself translated the French version into Spanish—an illustration of the several contexts of circulation of this book discussed by Richard.

There is a problem, though, in claiming Azara as an ancestor of "new knowledge" about the colonial Spanish world. Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra and Richard L. Kagan⁸ have convincingly demonstrated that, prior to the Bourbons and the Enlightenment-

⁵ The history of the Azara brothers immediately recalls that of another Spanish family of influence in the colonies and at home. Jose de Galvez (1720-1787) was Visitor General of New Spain (Mexico) from 1765 to 1772. As such he played a mayor role in the expulsion of the Jesuits form those territories, and in devising a military policy regarding Indian raids in the Sonoran frontier. His ideas were expanded to the rest of the Spanish colonies when he joined the Consejo de Indias. His brother Matias de Galvez and his nephew Bernardo de Galvez both served as Viceroy of New Spain. Bernardo was also governor of Louisiana and Cuba and commanded the Spanish army that joined the 13 colonies in the War of Independence. The city of Galveston was named in his honor, and an equestrian statue, somewhat hidden behind the State Department, recalls his contributions to the defeat of the British.

⁶ What is problematic is the relationship between the manuscript, its French translation and publication, and the discovery of the (supposedly) Spanish original by a nephew of Azara, who published it in Spain, in 1847. There are significant differences between the two editions, which Richard exposes and disentangles.

⁷ The publication of Thomas Falkner's "A Description of Patagonia" (1774) followed a sadder fate. Falkner was a Jesuit who had spent many years in Carmen de Patagones (Northern Patagonia). After the expulsion of the Order he settled in England. The manuscript of his "Description" (a very valuable ethnographic source) fell in the hands of William Combe, a writer/journalist, who edited it heavily for publication, to the chagrin of the author and his fellow Jesuits. The original manuscript is lost.

⁸ Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra, *How to Write The History of The New World: Histories, Epistemologies and Identities in the Eighteenth-Century Atlantic World* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001); Richard L. Kagan, *Clio & the Crown: The Politics of History in Medieval and Early Modern Spain* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009).

inspired programs of reforms and scientific research they launched, both Spanish thinkers and the Criollo elites in the colonies had in many ways pioneered the methods of gathering knowledge and narrating history later associated with the Scientific Revolution and the Enlightenment. There is, therefore, yet another angle to the geometry proposed by Richard, one that ties Azara's work to a larger dispute about how to write history, with firm roots in the Renaissance. This view is much more appreciative of the ethnographic works of Jesuit authors, for instance.⁹ Even if this larger dimension is missing in Richard's essay, having brought forth a new edition of Azara's classic will help to confront the important issues involved.

Johan Rudolf Rengger (1795-1832), a Swiss physician who traveled to Paraguay in 1818—where he spent seven years during the dictatorship of Jose Gaspar Rodriguez de Francia—, was, unlike Azara, an assiduous and direct observer of Indian life. In 1835 he published a book reflecting his experiences in the Chaco. Surprisingly, because of the quality of the information it contains about a number of topics, ranking from geology to natural history to sociology and ethnography, this book had not been translated until now. Rengger was in many ways an ethnographer *avant la lettre*, and provided accurate and perceptive information about the daily lives and customs of a number of Chaco tribes. He had read Azara, and took him as a reference, sometimes agreeing, sometimes pointedly disagreeing with him on a number of issues, mostly on his descriptions of the Indians of Paraguay. His book abounds in the kind of precise ethnographic detail regarding hunting practices, ritualized resolution of conflicts among rival groups and the institution of marriage among the Mbaya and the Guana, for instance, or among Indians and Criollos, that are hard to find in Azara. Rengger also records the legend of "The Last Jesuit," a diehard who has remained behind after the expulsion of the order, living in hiding among the Indians. Old and frail, he is brought out every day, like a lizard, to be exposed to the sun.

Rengger's fastidious elucidation of the maze of different names used to designate a single group of Indians contrasts with the fanciful invention of entire categories by contemporary ethnohistorians like James Schofield Saeger. In his book on the Chaco Mission Frontier, Saeger creates a phantom ethnic group, which he calls Guaycuru, by giving a common identity to a disparate number of people who have only one thing in common: they speak a language related to the Guaycuru family. What is most disturbing about this procedure is that it fuses into a fanciful ethnographic Golem a

⁹ Of the recent literature on the Jesuits in colonial Spanish America we would like to mention only two titles, as they include a variety of articles, subject matter and perspectives. Manfred Tietz, ed., *Los jesuitas españoles expulsos. Su imagen y su contribución al saber sobre el mundo hispanico en la Europa del siglo XVII* (Madrid: Verbuert-Iberoamericana, 2001). In this collection, the essay by Simona Binková on Florian Paucke is particularly thorough. Karl Kohut and Maria Cristina Torales Pacheco, eds., *Desde los confines de los imperios ibéricos. Los jesuitas de habla alemana en las misiones americanas* (Madrid: Verbuert-Iberoamericana, 2007). In this collection there is a short piece by Hans-Jurgen Lusenbrink on Martin Dobrizhoffer's "Historia de Abiponibus..." (Viena, 1784). The extraordinary ethnographies of both Paucke (Mocobi) and Dobrizhoffer (Abipones) are confined to obscure or difficult to get editions in German, Latin, or Spanish translations. Sara Coleridge, daughter of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, translated "Historia de Abiponibus..." into English, in an abridged version. These are important texts that are still awaiting good annotated, modern editions, and a fuller incorporation into the history of anthropology.

number of distinct Indian groups, all of them carriers of different histories, norms, institutions and political systems. The resulting monograph, therefore, produces a paradoxical result: Under the guise of writing the history of a fictional Indian group, the Gyacuru, what is offered is the suppression of the real histories of a number of groups the author failed to identify, perhaps guided by a natural history model, alert to the value of broad taxa but at odds with local, traditional forms of ethnic classification.¹⁰

Pastor Arenas (2003) has carefully sifted ethnographic and travel literature on the Gran Chaco covering several centuries and languages in search for passages that would describe instances of indigenous use of the natural habitat. The result is a unique reference book, full of marvels and variety, of great practical use to a botanist or a zoologist, as well as an ethnographer. Even a casual reader willing to stray for pleasure into a forest of stories will also find something in it.

The topic of indigenous political systems and forms of leadership has acquired pressing relevance and urgency after the passing of new Indian legislation—national or provincial—in the region. Nation-states look for interlocutors they can recognize as representative of Indian societies, in some cases generating the appointment of leaders who would not be seen as such by their communities in other circumstances. To address these and other related issues, Braunstein and Meichtry (2008) compiled twenty essays written by ethnographers who work in the Gran Chaco. Political anthropology is a young discipline, absent from academic practice until the 1960s. Neither Plato or Cicero in their *Republics*, or Aristotle in his *Politics*, or the old historians, Thucydides and Tacitus, or the philosophers of the Enlightenment (Montaigne, Hobbes, Montesquieu, Rousseau) conceived of political models different from those of classical Greece. It was common in the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th to negate the existence of institutional political forms among the peoples who were then called “primitive” or “savage.” The more serious attempts at analysis, those that recognized the existence of true political organizations in tribal societies, did so using surprisingly ethnocentric theoretical frameworks. Robert Lowie, in his classic book on “primitive sociology,” retains for his analyses the three standard categories of the modern Western state: executive, legislative and judicial, and Pierre Clastres bridges too quickly the distance between inequality and coercion.

The only answer to difficulties in delineating power structures and forms of leadership in the Gran Chaco comes from detailed ethnographies, because the subject, the political organization of the Indians of the region, is more original and sui generis than the most imaginative researcher could have dreamt of. Let's take the case of the Mennonites as an illustration. Their establishment in the Argentine Chaco goes back several decades. After dissolving their missions in 1956 they continued working with Toba Indians as “fraternal laborers” up until they left in 2010. Their absence was felt as a political vacuum by the Toba because they had based their own political and religious organizations on the rituals of the Pentecostal church, using these foreign, white

¹⁰ We developed the critique of Saeger's book in a longer piece, “La etnohistoria colonial en el Gran Chaco.”

structures as the main tool for preserving their identity and fighting back.¹¹ A particularly effective combination of research and oral history coalesced around an enquiry made in the Province of Formosa, Argentina, following changes in the country's constitution that enunciated a number of Indian rights which subsequently had to be interpreted and properly codified. The consultation, implemented with the help of NGOs and anthropologists, lasted several months and involved communities dispersed throughout the Province of Toba, Wichi and Pilaga Indians. The results were published in three volumes in 2002 with the title *Pensamientos de los Indígenas de Formosa* (Thoughts of the Indians of Formosa). It is not an ethnography; it is an extraordinarily rich document that will be useful to the Indians themselves in the future, and remain a mine of information of all sorts, including modes of political organization, for anthropologists, biologists, lawyers and conscientious civil servants.

Isabelle Combès is a French historian who for many years has made her residence in Santa Cruz de la Sierra, Bolivia. She is responsible for a steady stream of solid books and articles dealing with the ethnohistory of the Bolivian Chaco—particularly the Isono region—and also the current situation of the Chane and Chiriguano Indians living there. Her *Etnohistorias del Isono* (2005) was, in her words, a long explication of a singular quote from the Swedish ethnographer Erland Nordenskiöld, who visited the area in the early 20th century. The quote is from his book *Indianerleben: El Gran Chaco* (Life of the Indians)¹² and comes from the chapter titled “the Indians as Historians.” Combès’ project was to tell the history of Isono from the point of view of the Chiriguano and the Chane, relying on archival documents and fieldwork.

An important and tragic period in the history of the Indians of the Gran Chaco—because it brought about violent death, epidemics, created forced migrations and severe disruptions among groups living in Bolivia, Paraguay and Argentina—was the Chaco War. It lasted from 1932 to 1935, and was fought by Bolivia and Paraguay. It was an “oil war” over a region in the northern Chaco, claimed by both countries, believed to be rich in this fuel. Bolivia was backed by Germany, and Paraguay by France. Before Guernica and the Spanish Civil War, the air forces of both European countries tried their new planes, weapons and strategies in the dry forests of the Chaco, bombing soldiers and Indians indiscriminately. It was “the first modern war of South America” and the “last war of colonization of free Indian territories.” In a number of books Combès and Nicolas Richard, together with Luc Capdevilla and Pablo Barbosa, have recorded the memories of survivors of the conflict among the Indian populations of the three countries affected, and compiled essays on the war by a group of scholars analyzing its “Indian dimensions”.¹³

¹¹ See William D. Rayburn, *The Toba Indians of the Argentine Chaco* (Elkhart, Indiana: Mennonite Board of Missions & Charities, 1954); Elmer Miller, *Nurturing Doubt. From Mennonite Missionary to Anthropologist in the Argentine Chaco* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2005); and Horst, Willis, Ute Mueller-Eckardt, Frank Paul, *Mision sin conquista: Acompañamiento de comunidades indígenas autoctonas como practica misionera alternativa* (Buenos Aires: Cairos, 2009).

¹² Leipzig: Albert Vonnier Verlag, 1912. The title in Spanish is *La vida de los indios* (Bolivia: La Paz, 2002).

¹³ Capdevilla, Combes, Richard and Barbosa, Rennes, 2010; Nicolas Richard, 2008.

Among the thesis produced recently on a Gran Chaco topic, John Palmer's on the Wichi of Salta deserves special mention. Published as a book with the title *La buena voluntad wichi. Una espiritualidad indígena* (Buenos Aires, 2005), it is both a translation and an expansion of his D.Phil dissertation. It is also a superb example of the Oxford school of social anthropology, as organized by Evans-Pritchard after WWII: a combination of thorough field research, command of the Wichi language, prolonged participation in the life of the community, and the interpretive elegance and depth of the French sociological school. Palmer turns his entire work of analysis on the explanation of a central Wichi concept, expressed by the word *husek*, meaning *will*. In this he also follows Evans-Pritchard, who ciphered the explanation of Nuer religion on the proper understanding of the term *kwoth*. According to Palmer the Wichi believe in the existence of a will (a word that he prefers to *soul*) that preexists the human body. A person is a combination of a body (*t'isan*) occupied by a will (*husek*). This is an asymmetric relationship, with the body playing the role of a mere vessel. When this central force of life encompasses the community it transforms in "good will," a necessary cohesive element in the "metaphysics of the Wichi good will." When *husek* is used by a shaman it becomes willpower. From this dense, central concept Palmer moves outward to explain the Wichi relationship with the environment, their sense of justice, the importance of naming places and not repeating names of people, their interpretation of the foreigner as a category integrated to the Wichi worldview, the relationship between genders, between vigil and dreams—nothing short of an entire taxonomy of great subtlety, sophistication and sturdiness, and one that is aimed at reproduction and permanence. *La buena voluntad wichi* is not only a great ethnography in the Oxford classical tradition, but probably the more challenging, literary and complete representation of an Argentine Indian community.

We would like to finish this short review with a reference to iconography. Starting with the watercolors of the Jesuit Florian Paucke, the Chaco has a rich archive of images to explore. It includes the extraordinary photographs taken by Guido Boggiani¹⁴ the first one, according to Alfred Metraux, to capture an image "of an Indian smiling," Metraux's own pictures from the 1920's and 1930's, and the drawings of the contemporary Chamacoco Indians that illustrate this article. Last year the following documentary on the Pilaga of Formosa, now accesible on Youtube, was broadcast on the Argentine TV:
Part 1: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x_uF1KLNjIU
Part 2: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=92JDzCgmLK8>

This is a new phenomenon. Argentina is supposedly a country without Indians, an outpost of Europe. Nothing is more striking than these images, showing Pilaga Indians speaking for themselves, in their Chaco landscapes, filmed by a young filmmaker from

¹⁴ See Edgardo Krebs, "High Noon in the Rainforest," review of Guido Boggiani. *Fotograf. Fotografo. Fotografo. Photographer*. Pavel Fric and Yvonna Fricova. eds. (Praha: Nakladatelství Titanic, 1997). 82 photographs. 137 pp. Text and captions are in Czech, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, and English. *American Anthropologist* 104 (2002): 649-651.

Buenos Aires, aided by the anthropologist Ani Dell'arciprete, who has worked with the Pilaga for over thirty years.



Chamacoco drawings from *Transfiguraciones simbólicas, Ciclo ritual de los indios tomárxo del Chaco Boreal* by Edgardo Cordeu.

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CONFERENCE REPORTS

New Historiographical Approaches to Archaeological Research

September 9-11, 2010, Free University of Berlin.

Gisela Eberhardt, Free University of Berlin, and Fabian Link, University of Basel

Recent developments in the historiography of the sciences have led to a call for a revised history of archaeology and a move away from rational reconstructions of scientific progress. Historians of archaeology are beginning to use state-of-the-art historiographical concepts and tools to trace how archaeological knowledge has been produced and to reflect on the socio-historical conditions and spaces in which this knowledge has been generated. This workshop, funded by the Excellence Cluster TOPOI in Berlin, assembled scholars to discuss innovative approaches and new methods for writing histories of archaeology

Marianne Sommer (Zürich) opened the workshop with a keynote lecture on controversies surrounding scientific evidence of the so-called eoliths in 19th and 20th-century archaeology. Eoliths were thought to be the earliest stone-artifacts created by prehistoric men. Sommer's lecture demonstrated that debates about the eoliths mirrored the social structure of a time when archaeology was not yet established at universities. Utilizing frameworks from Fleck and Latour, Sommer exposed the transmission of knowledge concerning those alleged artifacts. She stressed the impact of popularized scientific knowledge, which could not be seen as a top-down phenomenon. However, classifying eoliths in series helped to incorporate these objects into the paradigm of progression.

The first section of the workshop dealt with research processes and social dynamics. Amara Thornton (London) presented an approach combining biography, prosopography, and network analysis, emphasizing the importance of the contexts of network production and the role of "fringe" players in this process. The case study of a network of British archaeologists working in Transjordan and Palestine in the early 20th century helped her to emphasize the importance of archival material for such a historical approach.