

Book Review

New perspective on the history of anthropology and archaeology

PETSCHELIES, ERIK. *Ascensão e declínio da etnologia alemã (1884-1950)*. 624 pp., bibliogr. Campinas, SP: Editora da Unicamp, 2022. R99 (paper).

Far exceeding the scope of a mere institutional chronicle, Erik Petschelies's new book is a profound dissection of how German ethnological thought shaped the understanding of alterity within Lowland South America. Petschelies argues that German ethnology was not a byproduct of late-stage colonialism but a maturation of Enlightenment and Romantic philosophies, specifically rooted in the Humboldtian premise of 'recognizing unity within multiplicity'. Influenced by Leibniz's linguistic-historical programme, this tradition prioritized language and material culture over biological reductionism or craniometry, seeking to comprehend the universal dimensions of the human psyche rather than proving racial inferiority. A significant milestone in this lineage is Johann Gottfried von Herder, whose concept of the *Volk* allowed for the valuation of non-European cultures on their own merits, viewing Indigenous peoples as unique, contemporary manifestations of creativity rather than 'living fossils'. This perspective was later solidified by the Humboldt brothers, who provided the empirical rigor and linguistic tools necessary to classify Brazil's Indigenous groups through a critical nexus between culture and environment.

The discipline's institutionalization was primarily architected by Adolf Bastian, whose theory of 'Elementary ideas' (*Elementargedanken*) posited a psychic unity of mankind that manifested in diverse forms depending on geographical environments. Under Bastian, the Berlin museum became a 'laboratory of the mind' where ethnographic objects were treated as scientific specimens. This tradition, also characterized by the methodological influence of Rudolf Virchow, staunchly resisted British linear evolutionism and simplistic racial theories, demanding empirical evidence and a clear distinction between 'literate' and 'natural' peoples. The transition from theory to praxis materialized through the first generation of Americanists, spearheaded by Karl von den Steinen, whose 1884 expedition to the Xingu region transformed a *terra incognita* into a systematic object of study. Alongside Paul Ehrenreich, Steinen documented subtle cultural nuances and sought universal structures within the local expressions of the Mehinako and other groups.

The field reached further maturity with a second generation led by Max Schmidt and Theodor Koch-Grünberg. Schmidt's 'cultural technology' emphasized an 'ethnography of doing', for which the mimetic learning of weaving techniques revealed the underlying mental logic more accurately than any physical measurement. His diaries also broke ground by offering an emotionally honest 'ethnology of misfortune' that challenged the image of the imperturbable scientist. Conversely, Koch-Grünberg professionalized the use of the phonograph and

Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute (N.S.) 00, 1-2

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camera, focusing on the 'aesthetics of the everyday' while maintaining a fierce political consciousness against the exploitation of Indigenous peoples during the rubber boom. His work on Taulipáng and Arekuná myths notably inspired Brazilian Modernist literature, including Mário de Andrade's *Macunaíma*.

Petschelies also explores the 'backstage' of fieldwork, revealing that Indigenous agency was an invisible but nonetheless essential engine of European science. Figures like Antônio Bakairí acted as cultural mediators and intellectual co-authors; foundational works like *Die Bakairi-Sprache* were, in fact, products of tacit co-authorship despite the inherent power asymmetries in the field. This interaction is further evidenced by the tradition of Indigenous drawing, which functioned as a 'sign language' to bypass linguistic barriers: these drawings, including 'inverted gazes' where Indigenous participants depicted the researchers themselves, proved that Indigenous thought possessed a sophisticated visual logic and capacity for abstraction.

The decline of this grand scientific project began with the First World War, which paralysed logistics and funding, eventually giving way to the rise of Curt Unkel Nimuendajú. A German

who became a Brazilian citizen, Nimuendajú represented at this time the ethnographic ideal by renouncing his European identity to dedicate his life to the defence of Indigenous peoples. However, the final blow to the tradition arrived with National Socialism, which purged humanistic institutions and forced figures like Franz Boas into expulsion and Max Schmidt into exile in Paraguay. This collapse led to a 'historical amnesia' in Brazilian pedagogy, where German science was unjustly associated with Nazism or eclipsed by French structuralism.

Ultimately, Petschelies reflects that the greatest legacy of these figures lies in their archives – the texts, photographs, and recordings that now serve as vital tools for Indigenous peoples to reclaim their history and identity in the twenty-first century. His balanced synthesis of biography, museology, history and theory suggests that the wealth of this tradition remains an essential, if once forgotten, pillar of both Americanism and anthropological history. At 624 dense pages, the book's length is an immediately striking feature – indeed, given such a wealth of high-quality content, it is a pity that Erik Petschelies's work was not even longer.

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