

COMPARATIVE ETHNOHISTORY AND THE SOUTHERN CONE

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Activities commemorating (positively or negatively) the Columbian quincentenary have moved the story of this encounter out of the libraries, off the dusty shelves of nineteenth-century museums, and back into the political arena where it began. In the United States and Canada, as in Latin America, the search for a “usable history” that would include Native Americans has prompted reassessment and revision of the historiography of Indian-white relations. This research note will review some of the more important ethnohistorical issues raised in North America and comment on possible comparative studies for the Southern Cone.

The genesis of ethnohistory as a discipline has been variously discussed. Whatever its origins, the term *ethnohistory* has been adopted by scholars studying the history of peoples without documentary records in North America, Asia, Africa, Latin America, and, more recently, the rest of the world. The term itself can be traced to early-twentieth-century British social anthropologists, particularly Clark Wissler, who coined the phrase to describe a methodology drawing on a wide spectrum of evidence, archaeological as well as documentary, to reconstruct what was then termed “pre-European history.”¹

In the United States, the fundamental impetus for ethnohistorical studies was tied directly to political issues of sovereignty and land rights. After the Indian Claims Commission was created by the U.S. Congress in 1946, Indian tribes hired lawyers, anthropologists, and historians to prepare claims for compensation of lands ceded by treaty to the U.S. government in earlier centuries. The intent of the commission was “to determine whether Indian tribes had received fair market value for their lands at the time of cession.”² The land claims process, which considered more than eight hundred cases in almost twenty years and cost hundreds of millions of dollars, insisted upon documentary evidence. All other forms of evi-

1. David Baereis, “The Ethnohistorical Approach and Archaeology,” *Ethnohistory* 8 (1961):49–77.

2. James Axtell, “The Ethnohistory of Early America: A Review Essay,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d ser., 25 (1978):110–44, 112.

dence (such as oral history and modern tribal practices) were inadmissible in court. These restrictions of the Western legal system frustrated the legal teams arguing in favor of the tribes, and the "expert witnesses" (anthropologists and historians) were forced to reconsider their scholarly methods. In the process, anthropologists hired by the tribes were diverted from synchronic ethnological concerns while historians were prompted to ask ethnological questions of the documents.

Soon what began as a methodological approach was transformed into a discipline. In 1954, a small group consisting mostly of scholars who had worked on land claim cases formed the American Society for Ethnohistory. Its first president, U.S. anthropologist Erminie Wheeler-Voegelin, provided a guiding definition of ethnohistory as "the study of identities, locations, contacts, movements, numbers, and cultural activities of primitive peoples from the earliest written records concerning them, onward in point of time."³ Almost immediately, however, use of the term "primitive" as opposed to "civilized" was called into question in the ensuing process of self-definition.⁴ Methodological approaches were refined and expanded to consider a wider base of evidence, including nondocumentary sources.

Even so, the bridge between anthropology and history remained tenuous, and the focus of ethnohistory seemed relegated to "primitive" peoples. In 1953 anthropologist William Fenton called on historians at the prestigious Institute of Early American History and Culture in Williamsburg, Virginia, to meet "on common ground" with ethnologists to enhance understanding of the past.⁵ A few historians of colonial America heeded the call, among them James Axtell. Since that time, Axtell's essays and books on the ethnohistory of colonial America have done much to stimulate major revisions of colonial American history. In 1978 he published "The Ethnohistory of Early America: A Review Essay," which summarized the advances made in the field of American ethnohistory, outlined different methodological approaches, and provided an important theoretical perspective for ethnohistorians. This view defined ethnohistory as "preeminently the history of the multiple and shifting frontiers between different cultures."⁶

Axtell's essay discussed the concept of culture as "an idealized pattern of meanings, values, and ideas differentially shared by the mem-

3. Erminie Wheeler-Voegelin, "An Ethnohistorian's Viewpoint," *Ethnohistory* 1 (1954):166–71, as cited in Axtell, "Ethnohistory of Early America." See also Helen Hornbeck Tanner, "Erminie Wheeler-Voegelin (1903–1988), Founder of the American Society for Ethnohistory," *Ethnohistory* 38, no. 1 (1991):58–72.

4. Sol Tax, "'Primitive' Peoples," *Current Anthropology* 1 (1960):441, as cited in Axtell, "Ethnohistory of Early America," 112.

5. James H. Merrell, "Some Thoughts on Colonial Historians and American Indians," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d ser., 46 (1989):94–119, esp. 94.

6. Axtell, "Ethnohistory of Early America."

bers of a society," a concept foreign to the historical profession at that time.⁷ Axtell also reviewed the analytical problems that can arise from ethnocentric biases in studying the process of change and continuity in the reciprocal relationship between two cultures in contact. He contrasted the anthropological method of "upstreaming" (working from the present to understand the past)⁸ with the traditional historical tendency toward "downstreaming" (working from the past toward the present) in attempting to avoid anachronism.⁹ According to Axtell, ethnohistorical methodology continues to rely on the written record but brings in a new dimension in "the critical use of ethnological concepts and materials in the examination and use of historical source materials" and also incorporates the archaeological record.¹⁰ The illuminating potential of the ethnohistorical method has been ably demonstrated in many award-winning books and articles on American Indian history, including the now classic works by Axtell,¹¹ Francis Jennings,¹² Anthony F. C. Wallace,¹³ Bruce Trigger,¹⁴ James H. Merrell,¹⁵ Richard White,¹⁶ and others. Such studies have done much to stimulate a serious revision of the historiography of the United States and colonial North America.

Yet some scholars question whether anyone else is getting the message. Only a decade after Axtell claimed a "considerable maturity" for ethnohistory,¹⁷ James Merrell published an article stating that the term *ethnohistory* is "not just redundant; it is pernicious. By calling themselves ethnohistorians, scholars writing on Indians in the colonial period may actually contribute to the persistent exclusion of natives from the rest of

7. *Ibid.*, 114; see also A. L. Kroeber and Clyde Kluckhohn, *Culture: A Critical Review of Concepts and Definitions* (Cambridge, Mass.: Peabody Museum of American Archaeology and Ethnology, 1952).

8. William Fenton, "Training of Historical Ethnologists," *American Anthropology*, n.s., 54 (1952):328–39.

9. *Ibid.*

10. Fenton, "Field Work," *Ethnohistory* 11 (1966):75, as cited in Axtell, "Ethnohistory of Early America," 113.

11. Axtell's most important books include *The European and the American Indian: Essays in the Ethnohistory of Colonial America* (London: University of Oxford Press, 1976); *The Indian Peoples of Eastern America: A Documentary History of the Sexes* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981); and *The Invasion Within: The Cultural Origins of North America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985).

12. Francis Jennings, *The Invasion of America: Indians, Colonialism, and the Cant of Conquest* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1975); see also Jennings, "A Growing Partnership: Historians, Anthropologists, and American History," *Ethnohistory* 29, no. 1 (1982):21–34.

13. Anthony F. C. Wallace, *The Death and Rebirth of the Seneca* (New York: Knopf, 1970).

14. Bruce G. Trigger, *The Children of Aataentsic: A History of the Huron People to 1660* (Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 1976).

15. James H. Merrell, *The Indians' New World: Catawbas and Their Neighbors from European Contact through the Era of Removal* (New York: Norton, 1989).

16. Richard White, *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650–1815* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

17. Axtell, "The Ethnohistory of Early America," 128.

early American studies.¹⁸ Merrell was quick to point out how ethnohistorical methodology has “broadened the horizons of scholarly inquiry.”¹⁹ But he argues that as much as historians have picked up the ethnohistorical banner (or that of the French *Annales* school or the “New Social History”) and as much as the new research has contributed to new understandings of other social groups like women and blacks, the study of Indians somehow remains a marginal “special case.” Merrell asserts, “This bad habit—this almost instinctive inclination to set Indians aside (which the use of ‘ethnohistory’ unwittingly encourages)—is symptomatic of a strain of presentism afflicting the scholarly community, an affliction that may also help explain why Indians are still left out in the cold.”²⁰ Merrell concludes that by ignoring the Indians, historians of colonial (North) America are making a very big mistake in understanding the colonial experience: “Indians were very much a part of the early American scene. . . . Our failure to grasp this simple yet vital fact of life in early America has crippled our every effort to reconstruct the colonial world on paper.”²¹

What parallels can be drawn with the history of Spanish America? First, some important differences in the historiography of Latin America must be pointed out. It would be inconceivable to consider the history of Latin America without taking into account the legacy of the Aztec, Maya, or Inca empires. The classical historiography of Latin America, however, tended to focus on Spanish colonial policies and institutions and viewed the Indians as subjects rather than actors. According to this perspective, the native peoples who resisted settlement and maintained their autonomy vis-à-vis colonial or national governments were most often perceived as obstacles to progress—particularly the “primitive” or “tribal” peoples with systems of territoriality that threatened claims to land based on the Western concept of individually owned property.

In recent decades, however, anthropologists and historians have joined in the effort to reconstruct the colonial world on paper. The influence of anthropologists like Miguel León Portilla²² and John Murra²³ on the historiography of Mesoamerica and the Andean world cannot be disputed. Some of the most exciting recent work on colonial Latin American history is considered ethnohistorical, including important advances

18. Merrell, “Colonial Historians and American Indians,” 115.

19. *Ibid.*

20. *Ibid.*, p. 116.

21. *Ibid.*

22. Miguel León Portilla, *Visión de los vencidos: relaciones indígenas de la conquista* (Mexico City: Universidad Autónoma Nacional de México, 1959).

23. John V. Murra, “Current Research and Prospects in Andean Ethnohistory,” *LARR* 5, no. 1 (1970):3–36. See also *La etnohistoria en Mesoamérica y los Andes*, compiled by Juan Manuel Pérez Zevallos y José Antonio Pérez Gollán (Mexico City: Textos Básicos y Manuales, INAH, 1987).

in gender studies,²⁴ literary criticism and models for understanding “the other,”²⁵ studies of the formation of class and systems of labor,²⁶ and those on the informal economy.²⁷

On narrowing the comparison to the history of the Southern Cone, one can begin to see greater parallels with the North American case, at least in the “tribal” organization and “nomadic” customs of the Indians. A “boom” has occurred in frontier history and the ethnohistory of the Mapuche and other groups in the Southern Cone who were previously considered “primitive.” This fertile new field of investigation is already beginning to exhibit many of the classic tensions that arise in interdisciplinary ethnohistorical studies. As a general observation, it can be said that scholars trained in anthropology and social sciences show a greater ability to explain the intentions and actions of the Mapuche from their own perspective, taking into account cultural differences and the significance of worldview on collective decisions, although historical anachronisms are sometimes introduced. In contrast, historians tend to demonstrate greater fidelity to the documentary record, thus avoiding overgeneralizations and stereotypes regarding an “ahistorical Indian.” Some of these works nevertheless fail at times to recognize a bias in the documentary record that obscures Mapuche reality.

The recent work of Chilean sociologist José Bengoa offers valuable insights into the structure of Mapuche society, although it can be criticized for occasional indiscriminate or anachronistic use of historical evidence (such as citing observations from nineteenth-century chroniclers as indicative of sixteenth-century society).²⁸ This method is not automatically incorrect but must be used with caution and be explicated fully. British-trained Chilean historian Leonardo León Solís, in his careful use of archival sources and strict attention to chronology, has done much to

24. Irene Silverblatt, *Moon, Sun, and Witches: Gender Ideologies and Class in Inca and Colonial Peru* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1987).

25. Rolena Adorno, *Cronista y príncipe: la obra de don Felipe Guamán Poma de Ayala* (Lima: Fondo Editorial, Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú: 1989); Regina Harrison, *Signs, Songs, and Memory in the Andes* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1989); Tzvetan Todorov, *La conquista de América: el problema del otro*, 2d ed. (Mexico City: Siglo Veintiuno, 1989); originally published in French in 1982.

26. For examples, see Karen Spalding, *Huarochiri, an Andean Society under Inca and Spanish Rule* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1984); Florencia Mallon, *The Defense of Community in Peru's Central Highlands* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1983); Inga Clendinnen, *Ambivalent Conquests: Maya and Spaniard in Yucatán, 1517–1570* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987); and Nancy Farriss, *Maya Society under Colonial Rule: The Collective Enterprise of Survival* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1984).

27. But one might ask why the label *ethnohistory* is applied to studies of Indians of Latin America when it might also be considered as part of the “New Social History” or the “Annales” school approach. Is this another instance of marginalizing study of the non-European world?

28. José Bengoa, *Historia del pueblo Mapuche: Siglos XIX y XX* (Santiago: Ediciones Sur, 1985).

dispel the idea of an unchanging or "ahistorical" Mapuche culture. Indeed, his work clearly demonstrates important changes over time and reveals the Mapuche as actors affecting their own destiny, even though their actions have been mostly interpreted through the etic (outsider) lens of Spanish observers.²⁹ Chilean historian Sergio Villalobos provided the first clear historical description of the Pehuenche (the northernmost Araucanians who inhabited the Araucaria forested cordillera) vis-à-vis the government in Chile.³⁰ Other fascinating and significant glimpses into frontier relations, at least from the perspective of colonial and government documents, have been uncovered by several Chilean historians. The work of Luz María Méndez and Jorge Pinto merits special consideration.³¹ Sketching another view of the Mapuche past from the perspective of archaeology, U.S. researcher Tom Dillehay is utilizing the material record as well as his profound understanding of modern tribal practices to help explain the past, taking care not to draw an automatic continuum from the prehistoric to the historic.³² French historian Jean-Pierre Blancpain's recent monograph, *Les Araucans et la frontière dans l'histoire du Chile au XIX siècle*, provides an overview of the conquest and colonization of Araucania in Chile, locating the discussion within larger questions about European colonization in the Americas.³³ My work has focused on the frontier with its own sets of social relations as an analytical unit for investigation, including analysis of the observers as well as the observed. My particular interest lies in the period between independence and the "conquest of the desert" in Argentina and the "pacification of the frontier" in Chile.³⁴ Martha Bechis Rosso has also analyzed the role of inter-ethnic relations during the period of nation-state building in Chile and Argentina.³⁵

Chilean anthropologists like Carlos Aldunate Solar and Rolf Foers-

29. Leonardo León Solís, *Maloqueros y conchavadores en Araucania y las pampas, 1700–1800* (Temuco: Ediciones Universidad de la Frontera, 1990).

30. Sergio Villalobos R., *Los Pehuenches en la vida fronteriza* (Santiago: Ediciones Universidad Católica de Chile, 1989).

31. Sergio Villalobos, Carlos Aldunate, Horacio Zapater, Luz María Méndez, and Carlos Bascuna, *Relaciones fronterizas en la Araucania* (Santiago: Ediciones Universidad Católica de Chile, 1982); Sergio Villalobos, Holdenis Casanova, Horacio Zapater, Luis Carreño, and Jorge Pinto, *Araucania: temas de Historia Fronteriza* (Temuco: Ediciones Universidad de la Frontera, 1989); and Jorge Pinto, Holdenis Casanova, Sergio Uribe, and Mauro Matthei, *Misioneros en la Araucania, 1600–1900* (Temuco: Ediciones Universidad de la Frontera, 1988).

32. Tom D. Dillehay, *Araucania: presente y pasado* (Santiago: Editorial Andrés Bello, 1990).

33. Jean-Pierre Blancpain, *Les Araucans et la frontière dans l'histoire du Chile des origines au XIX siècle: Une Épopée américaine* (Frankfurt: Vervuert, 1990).

34. Kristine L. Jones, "Conflict and Adaptation in the Argentine Pampas, 1750–1880," Ph.D., University of Chicago, 1984; Jones, "Nineteenth-Century Travel Accounts of Argentina," *Ethnohistory* 33, no. 2 (1986):195–211; and Jones, "Calfucura and Namuncura: Nation Builders of the Pampas," in *The Human Tradition in Latin America*, edited by Judith Ewell and William Beezley (Wilmington, Del.: Scholarly Resources, 1989), 2:175–86.

35. Martha Bechis Rosso, "Inter-Ethnic Relations during the Period of Nation-State Formation in Chile and Argentina: From Sovereign to Ethnic," Ph.D. diss., New School for Social Research, 1984.

ter³⁶ and ethnohistorians like Horacio Zapater, Osvaldo Silva, and Eduardo T  llez³⁷ have contributed much to scholarly understanding of Mapuche social and political organization. A strikingly illustrated ethnography of the Mapuche recently published in Germany by Helmut Schindler draws on much of this research and provides new ethnographic detail about contemporary Mapuche life.³⁸ These works, as well as earlier ethnographies by U.S. anthropologists Louis Faron and Mischa Titiev,³⁹ provide significant detail about continuity and change within Mapuche society in the 1900s.

In Argentina, anthropologist Ra  l Mandrini has turned his attention to sketching the outlines of Indian-white relations in the southern pampas.⁴⁰ Miguel Angel Palermo has contributed a critical rethinking of the role of the horse in transforming indigenous societies in the Southern Cone.⁴¹ Rodolfo Casamiquela, a paleontologist by training, has also influenced the ethnohistorical tradition in Argentina and Chile.⁴² Archaeologists, historians, and anthropologists by the dozens have followed his lead in unraveling linguistic and kinship considerations and in documenting a telling material record. Another fruitful and sometimes overlooked source is the Mapuche oral tradition itself, as well as the publications being edited by various Mapuche organizations.⁴³ By reviewing this literature, scholars can begin to understand process and change in the history of the native inhabitants of the Southern Cone.

Nonetheless, one might ask if the ethnohistorical focus on the Mapuche as a "special case" separates the issue artificially from the larger historical questions on Chile or Argentina.⁴⁴ How much of the corpus of

36. Rolf Foerster and Sonia Montecino, *Organizaciones, l  deres y contiendas Mapuches (1900–1970)* (Santiago: Centro Estudios de la Mujer, 1988).

37. *Encuentro de etnohistoriadores*, edited by Osvaldo Silva G., Eduardo Medina C., and Eduardo T  llez L. (Santiago: Universidad de Chile, 1988).

38. Helmut Schindler, *Bauern und Reiterkrieger: Die Mapuche-Indianer im Suden Amerikas* (Munich: Hirmer, 1990).

39. Such works include Louis C. Faron, *Mapuche Social Structure* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1961); Faron, *The Hawks of the Sun: Mapuche Morality and Its Ritual Attributes* (Pittsburgh, Pa.: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1964); and Mischa Titiev, *Araucanian Culture in Transition* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1951).

40. Ra  l Mandrini, "Desarrollo de una sociedad ind  gena pastoril en el   rea interserrana bonarense," *Anuario IEHS* 2 (1987):71–95 (published by the Universidad Nacional del Centro de la Provincia de Buenos Aires).

41. Miguel Angel Palermo, "Reflexiones sobre el llamado 'complejo ecuestre' en la Argentina," *Runa* 16 (1986):157–78; and Palermo, "La innovaci  n agropecuaria entre los ind  genas pampeano-patag  nicos: g  nesis y procesos," *IEHS* 3 (1988):43–90.

42. See especially Rodolfo M. Casamiquela, *Un nuevo panorama etnol  gico del   rea pampeana y patag  nica adyacente* (Santiago: Ediciones del Museo Nacional de Historia Natural, 1969).

43. Much of this material is published privately and can only be obtained through Mapuche organizations in Chile. One accessible major source is Mart  n Alonqueo Piutr  n, *Mapuche: ayer, hoy* (Temuco: Imprenta y Editorial "San Francisco," 1985).

44. Osvaldo Silva raises the same question in his introductory comments. See "Etno-

ethnohistorical advances has found its way into discussion of economic history, family and social history, labor history, or even political history? We might ask the same question of historians of the Southern Cone that North American ethnohistorians are asking their colleagues in Canadian and U.S. history: where are the Indians?⁴⁵ As ethnohistorians, are we perhaps continuing to marginalize the Indians with this “special treatment”?

Much remains to be learned about cultural bias in the Spanish colonizers’ perceptions of tribal peoples who would not submit to settlement. Did this viewpoint develop from the colonizers’ experience with Aztec and Inca empires or from preconceptions inherent in the classical tradition? How did these perceptions change over the centuries? How did the Mapuche or Tehuelche or Selk’nam respond? Also awaiting exploration are changes in the environment and ecology of the Southern Cone. Thus far, little scholarship has explained how and why Mapuche, Puelche, and Tehuelche individuals decided whether to participate in the independence movements in Argentina and Chile—and the impact of those choices on national histories.⁴⁶ Not much is known about specific policies regarding tribalism and transhumant territorial practices in Argentina or Chile. How was the conflict between indigenous understandings of territoriality and Western notions of private property resolved in the context of European immigration, colonization, and settlement in the nineteenth century?⁴⁷ In what ways did these policies shape the development of the modern nations? These questions clearly require more of a response than the simple teleological refrain that conquest was inevitable. Reviewing ethnohistorical literature of North America and the new approaches to understanding Indian history may be particularly suggestive in addressing these and other issues.⁴⁸

historia o historia indígena,” *Encuentro de Etnohistoriadores*, no. 1 (Jan. 1988):7–9 (published by the Universidad de Chile).

45. Francis Jennings has commented, “The impact of intercourse with Indians has escaped the notice of economic historians. At a panel of the meeting of the Organization of American Historians last year, quite learned and important scholars discussed ‘Wealth and Its Distribution in Colonial America’ without mentioning either the fur trade or the constant struggles by colonials to acquire Indian lands.” See Jennings, “A Growing Partnership,” *Ethnohistory* 29, no. 1 (1982):31.

46. It would be misleading not to acknowledge the major contribution of Leonardo León Solís in laying the groundwork, particularly his explanation of the Mapuche support of Royalist forces in Chile in *Maloqueros y conchavadores*.

47. Here one must cite the ongoing research of Jorge Pinto and his “Proyecto de Investigación: Misoneros y Mapuche, 1550–1900,” financed by the Fondo Nacional de Investigación y Desarrollo Tecnológico de Chile (FONDECYT).

48. For instance, see William S. Simmons, “Cultural Bias in the New England Puritans’ Perception of Indians,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d ser., 38 (Jan. 1981):56–72; and Simmons, *Spirit of the New England Tribes: Indian History and Folklore, 1620–1984* (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 1986); Brian Dippie, *Catlin and His Contemporaries: The Politics of Patronage* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1990); Alden T. Vaughan, “From White Man to Redskin: Changing Anglo-American Perceptions of the American Indian,” *American Historical Review* 87, no. 4 (Oct. 1982):917–52; Robert F. Berkhofer, *The White Man’s*

Recent years have witnessed the public attention stirred by the Columbian Quincentennial,⁴⁹ the rise of *indigenismo* in the Americas, and lively debates in Chile surrounding the proposed new Ley Indígena and the Mapuche land seizures. All these developments suggest that perhaps it is time for scholars dedicated to ethnohistorical studies of the Southern Cone to demonstrate the centrality of their research by making explicit the significance of ethnohistorical research for larger historical questions.

Indian: Images of the American Indian from Columbus to the Present (New York: Knopf, 1978); Olive P. Dickason, *The Myth of the Savage and the Beginnings of French Colonialism in the Americas* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1984); William Cronon, *Changes in the Land: Colonists and the Ecology of New England* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1983); Francis Prucha, *American Indian Policy in the Formative Years* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1962); and Robert A. Treppert, *Alternative to Extinction: Federal Indian Policy and the Beginnings of the Reservation System, 1846–51* (Philadelphia, Pa.: Temple University Press, 1975).

49. See, for example, *Newsweek's* Columbus Special Issue, "When Worlds Collide," a joint project with the Smithsonian's natural history exhibit (Fall–Winter 1991). This special issue reviews themes developed for the Smithsonian's new exhibition, "Seeds of Change," a costly public history project that will help shape popular history for hundreds of thousands of visitors.

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