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Precedents for the History of Ethnography and Ethnology in 16th Century New Spain

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Short Abstract

The paper will examine the ethnographic work carried out by Bernardino de Sahagún and his colleagues among the Náhuatl Indians of Mexico. It will also look at the theological and moral debates triggered by the sighting of the Amerindians, and the revolutionary ideas put forward by Bartolomé de Las Casas.

Long Abstract

Among the Franciscan friars who were sent to Mexico immediately after the fall of Tenochtitlan there were a number of extraordinary individuals: Andrés de Olmos, Francisco de Toral, Toribio de Benavente, Bernardino de Sahagún. In their zeal and dedication to the conversion of the Indians, they learned their languages, wrote the first vocabularies and grammars of Náhuatl and other local languages. Moreover, helped by the offspring of the Aztec elite educated in the colleges they run, they produced detailed ethnographic descriptions of local cultures, wrote the first histories of the peoples and civilizations of the region. They were true pioneers in what today would be labelled ethno-linguistics, ethno-history, ethnography through fieldwork and the use of native informants.

As regards the theological, doctrinal and moral debates conducted back in the metropolis one should take into account leading figures like Francisco de Vitoria, Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda, and Bartolomé de Las Casas. These debates in many important aspects verge upon modern intellectual reflection and theorizing in ethnology, or indeed socio-cultural anthropology, as the historian Anthony Pagden (1982) points out.

In revisiting such an extraordinary 'ethnographic-ethnological occasion' (Pels and Salemink 1999) in the context of colonial New Spain I will examine the complex interplay between the diverse forces and factors that converge in this particular socio-political and historical field: The Crown, the Church, the Conquistadores, the Missionaries, the Indians. As well as the theologians back in Salamanca and Valladolid, or the officials of the Inquisition brought in the colonies at some point.

There are three dimensions to the history of anthropology worth considering. One relates to the generic reflection on the human condition and the nature of society, which remits to the etymology of the word: *anthropos*, *logos*. Here the focus of inquiry is placed on the philosophical, moral, in sum intellectual lineages of the discipline; and on the underpinnings of its theory. A second dimension relates to a more restricted concern with the development of anthropology as an academic discipline, and with the institutions and people who are involved in it. This is a more conventional endeavor that aims at highlighting the contributions to the growth of the discipline by its most renowned practitioners and forerunners. And there is a third line of endeavor which consists in placing the study of anthropology in the wider framework of the history-philosophy-sociology of science. Such an approach aims at situating practices, theories and ideas in the particular spatial, temporal, social, and political contexts in which they happen. In this last sense the development of anthropology and its theory may be viewed as the contingent outcome of its particular history. This is what authors such as Henrika Kuklick (1991) and Thomas Patterson (2001) have tried to accomplish in writing the ‘social history’ of anthropology in Britain and the United States, respectively. All three aspects of the development of anthropology in Spain will be taken into consideration. Should it be made clear at this stage that the concept “anthropology” is used as a short hand for socio-cultural anthropology; alternatively labelled ethnology, ethnography or folklore studies in particular national historical and academic contexts.

Precedents for anthropos-logos in the Hispanic world

The reflection on the multiplicity of humankind, and the amazing diversity of societies and cultures that humans create over space and time, has a long intellectual lineage. In standard history of anthropology textbooks the inquiry and deliberation is stretched to Antiquity, pointing out the relevance for *anthropos-logos* of works by authors such as Herodotus (484-425 BC). For *The History*, which chronicles the Greco-Persian wars in the fifth century BC, incorporates descriptions of a diversity of nations and peoples, custom and cultures, that Herodotus encountered in his travels; or came to know about from either oral, including folklore and myth, or written sources. *The History* is also a dramatic account of the epic confrontation between the perceived Greek civility and Persian despotism. Thus Herodotus’ work, an

indisputable part of the Western literary canon, is also considered a foundation stone for the discipline of history.

Accounts of prodigious journeys of travel and trade are considered relevant precedents for anthropology as well. Think of Marco Polo's dictated narration of his and his father and uncle's journeys through Central Asia as far as China, written down by Rustichello da Pisa in the *Book of the Marvels of the World*, commonly known as *The Travels of Marco Polo*. A great deed of discovery and knowledge that was emulated somehow hundred and fifty years later by Ruy González de Clavijo's narration, while heading the embassy sent by the King of Castile to the Court of Timour at Samarkand. There are other precedents from the Spanish Middle Ages worth mentioning in this regard. In chronological order, the account written down by a Spanish Jew, Benjamin de Tudela (1130-1173) in his *Book of Travels*; where he recounts impressions of people encountered, places visited and historical events witnessed. In particular, he systematically provides empirical detail about the living conditions of Jewish communities on both shores of the Mediterranean, and deep into the Middle East, that he looks for and establishes contact with during his journeys (c. 1160-1173). From the 13th century stands out the towering figure of Ramon Llull (1232-1315): polyglot, prolific writer in several disciplines, mastering a wide range of the medieval arts, theologian and preacher (in Arabic and other languages), who in the pursuit of his self given mission to convert the infidels (Muslims and Jews) travelled widely on both sides of the Western Mediterranean and as far as Tierra Santa, leaving for posterity an extraordinary anthology of highly original and erudite writings. Then in the following century there is Ibn Battūta (1304-1377), the traveler and explorer born in the city of Tanger, who toured extensively in Al-Andalus (Islamic Spain) and from there set out on an extraordinary journey which eventually took him to all corners of the Islamic world and beyond through northern Africa, Persia, India, south east Asia, and China. A journey of travel, exploration and knowledge --ostensibly started as a pilgrimage to Mecca-- that lasted for twenty three years, narrated in Arabic in the form of a *rihla* or travel account: *The Travels of Ibn Battūta*. Now, these extraordinary works are examples and important precedents, linked to Spain and its history, as regards the first dimension of the history of anthropology (*anthropos-logos*).

There exist other 'ethnographic occasions' arising in a colonial location or setting associated with Spain which are much closer to what is commonly accepted as belonging to academic anthropology (Pels and Salemink, eds. 1999). Some historical moments which constitute important if lost opportunities for the establishment of the discipline in academia. Moreover, on the whole they may be acknowledged as one of those relatively 'neglected pasts' in what concerns the writing of an 'authorized' history of anthropology, as set down in the academic annals and textbooks from the discipline's mainstream (Kuklick 2008: 159-220). Such an 'ethnographic occasion' arises in the sixteenth century when European subjects 'discovered' the Indies, later named Americas. A discovery followed by military conquest and subjugation-colonization of vast territories in Central and South America by the Spanish, and the Portuguese. There are three early texts that merit to be recalled here: *Historia verdadera de la conquista de la Nueva España* [The True History of the Conquest of New Spain], by Bernal Díaz del Castillo; *Historia general de las cosas de Nueva España* [General History of the Things of New Spain], by Fray Bernardino de Sahagún; and *Comentarios Reales de los Incas* [Royal Commentaries of the Incas], by Inca Garcilaso de la Vega.

The first one is a chronicle, and a literary masterpiece, of the military deeds of Hernán Cortés and his armies, presumably written down by one foot soldier who took part in the expeditions that led to the fall of the Aztecs, and the conquest of huge territories in Mesoamerica for the Spanish Crown. The manuscript travelled back and forth from Spain to Mexico, to Guatemala and back to Spain. In the course of a fascinating *periplus* it was partially amended, several times copied, and finally given an author's name! In a recent book, the anthropologist and historian Christian Duverger, who had previously published a biography of Cortés, as well as several works on the pre-Hispanic Aztecs, vigorously asserts (providing overwhelming empirical evidence in support of his thesis) that the most likely author of the chronicle was Hernán Cortés himself. Duverger claims that it was written during a Cortés stay of three years (1543-46) in the court city of Valladolid, Spain. The reasons for the writing of an account of his own deeds and merits, via the creation of a literary character (the anonymous foot soldier who had seemingly participated in all the important battles and military campaigns which led to the conquest of the Mexico), are thoroughly and judiciously analyzed in the book.

Moreover, Hernán Cortés commissions his chaplain and personal secretary Francisco López de Gómara to write [on his dictation, and making available to him his extensive archives] the 'official' history of the conquest of Mexico. It is significant that in *The True History of the Conquest of New Spain* the author engages in dialogue, sometimes makes corrections of detail or argument, and even enters into controversy with the author of *History of the Conquest of Mexico*. It seems plausible in effect that Hernán Cortés would have set out to produce two different accounts of his life accomplishments, as a way to set the record straight in front of his many enemies in the court, to vindicate himself before the Emperor, and for Eternity! Considering that his writings have been prohibited and taken out from public view, it is understandable that he chooses to rely on a fictional character, a pseudonym, to bring forward his own account of events (Duverger, 2012).

The second work recalled is the encyclopaedic culmination of true ethnographic inquiry carried out by the Franciscan missionary Fray Bernardino de Sahagún, during many years of work with indigenous Nahuatl speakers, in collaboration with his pupils at the Santa Cruz de Tlatelolco College, who were the descendents of the Aztec-Nahuatl nobility and elite classes. The *Historia General* makes an extraordinary contribution to the modern concept of 'ethnography' as data collected via intensive fieldwork among the people concerned, carried out directly by the ethnographer or his assistants through the use of the local languages.

The third textual source is a fascinating account (written in very good literary and erudite style) of pre-Hispanic Inca tradition and custom written by a Peruvian indigenous 'mestizo', the son of an Inca princess and a Spanish captain (Zamora, 1988). Inca Garcilaso de la Vega was educated as a Spanish subject, as pertained to a member of the colonial elite. When he proceeded (during his stay in Spain) to write his account of traditional Inca custom (including also a chronicle of the Spanish conquest of Peru) he was already an accomplished and talented writer. Seemingly he wrote the *Comentarios* relaying on oral memory, and his own childhood experiences; but it is also evident in his prose and argumentation the influence of a Spanish education, and the concepts, notions and phraseology of Catholic theology.

The discovery and conquest of the Indies/Americas, with its fascinating array of peoples, cultures and civilizations, caused a great impact in the metropolis and true intellectual 'shock waves' all through Europe at the time. The news arriving in Spain --via the many *relaciones*, memorials, chronicles and correspondence sent to the Spanish court and the Consejo de Indias by the explorers (starting with Cristobal Colón), soldiers-conquistadores, royal officials and state bureaucrats, missionaries and other clergy of the Catholic church (commissioned by the Vatican to preach, convert, and otherwise provide spiritual comfort for the new subjects of Castile's monarchs)-- had a tremendous resonance in academic and intellectual circles in Salamanca, Valladolid, and elsewhere.

The academic debates (framed mostly in theological, moral and legal terms) were passionate, and carried substantial consequence for the formulation and implementation of the policies and doctrine of Church and State. They also had tremendous significance in what regards the *anthropos-logos* dimension to our discipline's intellectual history. The historian Anthony Pagden (1982) examines the work of several theologians (Francisco de Vitoria and his disciples), missionaries and men of the Church. Like the famous Dominican who became bishop of Chiapas Bartolomé de Las Casas, the 'champion of the indians'; Ginés de Sepúlveda, or the Jesuit historians Acosta and Lafitau) who took part in this moral and theological great debate over the years. In his analyses and interpretation of these academic and intellectual debates, Pagden discerns substantive elements of a true and original 'comparative ethnology'. It is necessary to make a critical note here, though, in that the work of Franciscan missionaries and true field ethnographers like Fray Bernardino de Sahagún, Fray Toribio de Benavente, or the pioneer of ethnolinguistics Fray Andrés de Olmos are not mentioned in Pagden's book. It may be due to the fact that their works and writings did not figure much in the erudite academic debates at the time. They were not known to the academicians or were not considered relevant for their debates. The 'theoreticians' (theologians in this particular case) seem to have carried all the authority; and the clerics of higher status the doctrinal upper hand in these debates. It is nonetheless disappointing that their great ethnographic works are not even mentioned or added to the list of references in Anthony Pagden's book allegedly on the 'origins of comparative ethnology'!

Nevertheless, one can appreciate in the authors and works evoked above a number of extraordinary innovations (or rather inventions, for there was no immediate precedent on which to build up) in method and epistemology, which look surprisingly modern by the standards of nineteenth and twentieth century academic anthropology, except that the accomplishments were made back in the 16th century! Unfortunately such 'ethnological occasions' (to paraphrase one of Pels and Salemink, 1999 felicitous concepts) were discontinued. They did not consolidate in any specific 'tradition' within the academies of Spain or elsewhere in Europe. Furthermore, the extraordinary contributions of these scholars and clerics have been generally ignored in the annals of most of the 'official' history of academic anthropology, particularly in the textbooks originally written in English and for the English speaking public¹.

¹ There are some exceptions to this relative neglect, though; as in the books by R. E. Bieder (1986), and Mario Erdheim (1990). We gratefully acknowledge John Eidson's calling our attention to these references and other relevant sources. Detailed attention to the contributions made by Spanish theologians and jurists in the 16th century to "the origins of comparative ethnology" has come from other disciplinary quarters, though. Like the important book by British historian Anthony Pagden (1982). Besides the multiple references to these authors that one can find in Spanish speaking sources in disciplines like history, law, or literary studies, which would be too long to list here. The neglect is not such if we look at the Spanish speaking world, and to authors who have written and published in this language: Manuel Marzal (1981), Carmelo Lisón-Tolosana (1976), José Alcina Franch (1986), or Miguel León Portilla, among many others.

The conquest and conversion of the Indians. Colonial regimes and missionary practice in sixteenth century New Spain.
Outline for a research project

The aim of this research project is to contribute a chapter to the history of Sociocultural Anthropology, by other names Ethnology.

The intention is to focus on the legacy of a number of extraordinary people that during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries made pioneering contributions to the discipline, when it had not yet acquired its name. What I propose is to reread and rethink (with the specific purpose mentioned above), the works of authors usually ignored or seldom mentioned in the 'official' history textbooks of academic anthropology. A discipline that is monopolized and hegemonized by the British and American schools.

Moreover my intention is not to add some notes on the margins of a conventional history of anthropology or ethnology, built by accumulating biographies of prominent authors, and catalogs of his works and theoretical contributions. These investigations, which are here formulated in a very general and preliminary basis, I intend to place in the broader context of the history of culture, and the philosophy of science. In other words, I aim to contribute a small chapter to a social and political history of sociocultural anthropology or ethnology which would be located in the open field of the history of science (including the social sciences and humanities) and of humanistic knowledge.

It is also about making a contribution, by rereading from ethnological perspectives the works and practices of a handful of Spaniards, mostly clerics, friars of various religious orders, who had the chance to live extraordinary lives, and take on unusual challenges in the newly discovered territories for Europeans.

To contribute to the always open reflection on who we are, and how we perceive the splendid diversity in which humanity manifests itself, going to the root meaning of the name of discipline: ***Anthropos-Logos***.

A permanent reflection on the diversity of cultures and mores in which human beings are installed over time and across space on this planet, for whose illustration I have chosen to highlight a few important names and 'anthropological occasions' (Pels and Salemink, 1999).

It is a project that requires an interdisciplinary and multidimensional approach which would incorporate disciplines such as:

Literary criticism and comparative literature

Social and cultural history

The philosophy of science and knowledge

Sociocultural anthropology

The sociology of law (civil, canonical, customary)

In order to build a more inclusive vision, not narrowly disciplinary, of the History of Ethnology and Socio-Cultural Anthropology.

COLONIAL REGIMES, defined by a range of different factors:

The 'Laws of Burgos' of 1512, 'Laws of Valladolid' 1514

The 'New Laws' of 1542. Other sets of laws regarding the Governing of the Indies (i.e. on the Government of the Viceroyalty of Peru)

Policies and decisions issued by the authorities and major players in the drama of the conquest, colonization and conversion of the peoples "found" and met by the Spaniards and other Europeans in the Indies, later called the Americas:

The Hispanic Monarchy, the Crown

The Catholic Church, the Vatican

The Council of Castile, the Council of the Indies

Religious Orders: 'religious activism' (i.e. Franciscans, Dominicans, Carmelites, Jesuits ...)

Town councils (*cabildos*) of major cities: Mexico, Lima...

Along with the patterns established in the processes of discovery, conquest or colonization and appropriation, at each time and place.

The emergence of new actors and powers in the Colony, both among the ruling elites and subordinate classes.

Historical case studies, 'anthropological occasions':

The New Spain

The Viceroyalty of Peru

Reductions in Paraguay, missions of the Society of Jesus elsewhere in South America (Brazil included).

Mythical and fabulous regions like: El Dorado, Canela, Amazonas

The theological and moral debates in the metropolis: at the University of Salamanca, Colegio de San Gregorio of Valladolid. Mostly under the influence of Francisco de Vitoria's writings and doctrine.

The protagonists: their biographies, works, correspondence with other people.

Sources for research:

Relations, Memorials, letters and correspondence, writings of diverse character...

Chronicles and Narrations of expeditions of conquest and discovery...

Histories built from direct experience, firsthand knowledge.

Histories and treaties built from the metropolis, relying on the accounts of others, read or heard from testimonies of the protagonists

Documentation emerging from the decision-making and administrative instances and processes, whether civil or religious.