



Chungara, Revista de Antropología Chilena

ISSN: 0716-1182

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Chungara, Revista de Antropología Chilena, vol. 42, núm. 1, junio, 2010, pp. 59-61

Universidad de Tarapacá

Arica, Chile

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REMARKS IN MEMORY OF JOHN VICTOR MURRA¹

Sidney Mintz²

I knew John Murra for half of his life, and –I am still counting– nearly two thirds of mine. But when I tried to figure out what I might best say here today, that would stand for my own feelings –for what the loss of John means to me, and what I think it means to our profession– I found it difficult to formulate my thoughts.

A great deal will be said by us today about him, and about our love and admiration for him. But everything we say is likely to be evidence of John's immense complexity as a person. We will be filling in partly the picture of that complexity with our stories; and John, of course, was a superb raconteur himself. I remember how my wife and I listened to him once in Paris, as he described for a group of our friends, in his flawless but phonetically Rumanian French, how the Inuit shamans, confronted with the overwhelming sins of their people, are obliged to swim down to the ocean's bottom, to comb the lice from the hair of the goddess Sedna, so that she will forgive the human sinners, restore balance to the earth, and enable the animals –the seals and walruses– once more to agree to give their bodies to the Inuit as food. Anyone in that enchanted audience, like anyone in any of John's thousands of enchanted audiences, who might have thought that anthropology was only about studying kinship, or sugar, or Foucault, or cockfights, or cocktail waitresses, would at that very moment begin to think again, and *as if for the first time*. But you know all this – just as you know that from John's lips, the stories of kinship and sugar and Foucault and cockfights and cocktail waitresses could become every bit as enchanting as Sedna's story.

Having come this far, I tried to write down more, but felt confronted by a dilemma. One can remember John with anecdotes, and it may be the best way of all. Anecdotes so often uncover the many aspects to a special spirit, even as they uncover the love of the teller. But a different way to remember is to try

to *describe* in some way this man we wish to honor –and that, I think, is far more difficult. Description asks of us that what we say be more analytical, more interpretive, than anecdotes; anecdotes have the virtue of usually leaving their point for the listener herself to uncover. Risky though it may be, I have decided to try to do a little of each.

I can think of many friends about whose personalities I feel I can speak easily. That is not so in John's case. Nor was it ever so in his case, at least for me. Even when I first knew him, I found him difficult to describe. I always felt he merited superlatives –even sometimes negative superlatives– and I was always interested in his distinctive sensibility. He was a rare person, among other things, because he *never* bored. Let me illustrate with an example of what I consider his complexity.

John was a man who liked power a lot; he was fascinated by the use of power, and even by the *idea* of power. He didn't *want* power, except perhaps in the sense of the power to educate. Yet he liked being *near* power. If ever there was an *eminence grise* in want of a Richelieu, it was John. I was once able to invite him and two other friends for lunch, in a large institutional dining room. One of the other guests he knew well –a Catalonian refugee from loyalist Spain who, at the old age of 19, had been a tank commander and political commissar of the fifteenth brigade. The other guest he had not known personally before –a distinguished economist who had served in Spain in the Thaelmann Battalion, and in later years in occupied France, assisting a well-known political figure, together with whom he risked his life, saving many people who were escaping fascism. I remember that luncheon occasion well, because all three of these men were surprisingly taciturn that afternoon –yet plainly, also much contented to be in each other's company. One felt at that table the sort of power John relished being near. But the cardinals John usually sought out were

¹ Read at a gathering in Ithaca to commemorate John Murra, December 16, 2006.

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of an antiauthoritarian sort who were themselves also invariably authoritarian. This made John, as it made so many of us, endlessly optimistic, faithful standard bearers of lost causes.

Yet another aspect of our beloved friend: John was one of the most important defenders of anthropological fieldwork in our discipline. But John did not really like to do the kind of fieldwork he frequently praised. If given his choice, he really preferred to talk to the ambassador, the journalist, the novelist, the organizer, the leader of the opposition. A quick study and a surprisingly good and smart listener, he made the most of every such interview, whether it was the US Ambassador to Jamaica; Puerto Rican Gov. Luis Muñoz Marín; Tom Mboya; or the eventually assassinated President of Togoland, the German-speaking Sylvanus G. Olimpio.

But in spite of his preference for one kind of fieldwork over another, John also breathed life into the fieldwork that his students did. In the year that I first knew him, I recall clearly how I would bring him my field notes and have him point out all sorts of things that I had missed. Indeed, had it not been for John explaining to me what my own fact-gathering *meant*, an early paper of mine, while still full of the same data, would have had only a wisp of its theoretical relevance.

I will not dwell on John's contributions to our discipline; I know others here will do so, as will those who write on his scholarship in coming decades. But I want to say one thing, perhaps so obvious it might get overlooked. John was not so much a believer in four fields as a scholar who recognized how the unity of anthropology rested in endlessly emergent conceptions of our distinctive humanity. Whether writing, teaching or lecturing about the Paleosiberians, the tribal peoples of Ecuador, African political systems, the Caribbean or the Andes, John did not dutifully visit the so-called four fields; instead he gave shape to his commentary by uncovering their integrated usefulness in explaining and understanding human behavior in space and time. He was totally imbued with exactly that spirit of disciplinary unity that many American departments today have so carefully killed off.

Nearly two decades ago, I had an opportunity to visit the then Soviet Union as a representative of the AAA, and to bring John with me, if I could only persuade him to come. Some of you might suppose that John would have leaped at the chance to visit the Soviet Union; but such was not the case.

In fact, when I made my pitch, he was unwilling or afraid to go, he said, because they would put him in a salt mine. I replied rather flippantly that he wasn't important enough to be put in a salt mine.

My reason for wanting him to go was anything but altruistic. I was heading up a group of scholars who would be giving papers at a conference on ethnicity in Kiev; and my opposite number, with whom I had to deal, was a big shot in the Soviet Academy, the anthropologist Yu. V. Bromley. I do not speak Russian and I did not trust Soviet translators. I knew that John would not only translate for me, but could also help me understand *why* I was being told this and that. I had, after all, been to Moscow before. I finally convinced him to come, and we went to Kiev. He had a wonderful time, particularly wandering around the city and engaging locals in conversation. At the meetings, it was marvelous to watch him operate; and a big cocktail party with wonderful Russian *grbi* in hot sour cream and good vodka provided the right setting. One of the people he spent most time with at the party was a Russian anthropologist named Galina "Galya" Starovoitova, an immensely impressive person, who was also a leading Leningrad politician. A couple of years later, Galya was assassinated. She had recently been fired as Yeltsin's adviser on ethnicity, probably because she had opposed so stoutly what had been happening in Chechnya. Since then she has been described as "a charismatic leader of the first generation of *perestroika*", and her death made clear how difficult it has been for Russia to find itself politically, perhaps especially in relation to what once were called the minority peoples. The only reason I knew about Starovoitova when the terrible news of her assassination reached the U.S. was because of the field work John had done with her, back in Kiev.

That ethnicity conference provided at least one more anecdote. Though John was translating, he was along as a participant in the ethnicity sessions. And good soldier that he was, he had prepared a paper, which he presented in English, much like us ignoramuses, to be translated *viva voce* into Russian by an extremely somber and perspiring Ukrainian. About midway in his speech, John suddenly stopped speaking, looked straight at the translator, and said in English, "No, no, you've got it all wrong"—then, in Russian, he straightened out the hapless translator on his mistakes, before proceeding to present the preceding paragraph of his paper in *Russian*—only

then switching back to English again! It was an utterly astonishing moment for the locals, and the high point of the conference for me, I suppose. But I did have one fleeting vision of a salt mine.

I will conclude with an event that, for me, represents John's special gift to us. In 2002, the Swiss Embassy in Washington sponsored an event to celebrate the centenary of Alfred Métraux. Métraux was best known for his excellent ethnographies of Tropical Forest peoples in Amazonia, but had also worked on Easter Island, and in Haiti for UNESCO. During the Second World War, John had gotten to know him in Washington, at the time plans for the *Handbook of South American Indians* were being laid. They became dear friends; and John was deeply disturbed when we got the news in 1963 that Métraux, probably depressed by illness, had taken his own life.

When the Embassy organized its memorial I was asked to take part because the organizer knew me, and because I'd written a foreword to a book of Métraux's on Haitian religion. Though I'd met Métraux, I told the organizer, I scarcely knew him, and that of course he should get John. So four years ago John came from Ithaca to Washington to remember Alfred Métraux. He had to be brought

from Ithaca to Syracuse, I think it was, then flown to Washington, where he was brought in a wheelchair to the Embassy. Though it was four years ago, I remember it very clearly. John looked shrunken and old in the chair, his voice barely audible. When he was wheeled to the front of the room to speak and handed the mike, however, he indicated firmly that he wanted to stand to speak. Once standing at the podium, he seemed to regain his voice and, indeed, to be rejuvenated. He spoke clearly and unhesitatingly, and without notes of any kind, giving us a clear and quite arresting account of Métraux's work, and of their friendship. It went on for perhaps twenty minutes, while we sat there, enraptured. And then he said, more softly, "I think that is all that I have to say," and was helped back into the wheelchair. Though he remained enlivened, as we all were, after he finished, the transformation that seemed to take place when he stood before us was utterly remarkable. I sat there thinking that if the people here in Ithaca had persuaded John to give a twenty-minute lecture every day, he might have lived to be a hundred. Who could ever be a better teacher than John? Would we not all wish to be remembered like him?

December 16, 2006

