



Homage to Clio and Santa Rosalia: History, Epic and Evolution

Susanna Hecht ¹

RESENHA DO LIVRO:

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" Our people may not be interested in talking seriously about the future, yet. But the future will be interested in talking to them." Lenin.

I have taken as my muses Clio and Sta Rosalia, because I think they have particular resonance at this moment. Clio is, of course, the Muse of History and Epic Poetry. She is often portrayed with a lute because epics were typically sung in ancient times, and throughout non-western cultures, the history of their worlds is recited in poetry and song. I am thinking specifically in this case of the epic narratives recited by the master rhetoricians of the Kayapo among many other native Amazonian groups. In addition to words, the world itself communicated history — the deep inscription in landforms, historical ecologies, earlier land uses and landscapes not just derived from the acts of living generations or even of humans, since animals and supernatural beings could also hold sway. Structures and places visited on treks, forays and military surveys materialized past social events: origins, actions, triumphs and failures. The Epic is inscribed both in land and song. In another register, the Afro-Colombians of the Pacific coast, with their aquatic epistemologies live worlds with markers mostly different from what we westerners share, and their fluid landscapes are largely indecipherable to us. The

¹ Ph.D. in Geography, University of California, Los Angeles, United States. Graduate Institute of International Development, Geneva / Luskin School of Public Affairs / Institute of the Environment and Sustainability, University of California, Los Angeles, United States. sbhecht@ucla.edu

mapping of "meandering poetics" of water worlds through verse invoke both traditional lyric models and transcripts of new forms of resistance that shape the powerful cultural matrix that prevailed in this refuge region for centuries. (Oslander 2016). Their histories were forged like those of many in Latin America from noble pasts, desperate refuges, craven politics, wars of dubious outcome, complex intercultural redoubts, and long migrations. It is also useful to reflect that these cultures which I mention have been in contact with global economies of commodities, politics and intercultural relations for centuries. That they reside in peripheries — the Colombian Chaco, Amazonia — doesn't diminish the reality that they are present and influences in the politics of the current day, they shaped political configurations in the past, and that their landscapes were forged from globalizations of the past and present — slaves, gold, precious woods, and of course, the land — the place — itself. A glance at the Constitutions of Brazil and Colombia the nation states of the two groups I have just described, invoke historical rights and autonomies to areas where not only lifeways and local economies are pursued, but perhaps more profoundly, where different epistemes are allowed aegis over significant territories. The means of claiming them is through historical data and landscape information. My point here is not to embark on some romantic story about post-cultural nature and indigenous harmony, which is enjoying a certain vogue at this moment (Kohn 2014 Descola 2015). More generally this romantic yearning occupies a permanent berth in Amazonian discourses and iconography, and in the politics and political uses traditional peoples. Rather its to point up the central question of different epistemes and the questions of environment.

As many authors in this collection point out, the task of environmental knowledge and the environmental humanities is an epistemological one, that is, it is about how we frame and think about nature as both as a historical social and scientific construct and a participant in the making of the coming worlds in which we must live. Nature and the planet are not substrates. Epistemic changes and the myths that go with them have great bearing on the sociologies and political contexts of the future. This "nature" has always structured life in complex ways — just as it transformed the human situation in the unfolding of daily life and more acutely, and perhaps with more relevance for today — in the periodic catastrophes like the Tambora explosion, the periodic El Ninos and the world of hurricanes, (Wood 2015, Davis 2001, Schwartz, 2015). This is a banal observation, but it has to serve as point of departure for the creative evolution of whatever our next phase will be. Much of the first section of this book addresses questions of epistemology directly — thru ways of thinking about nature and thinking about socio-natures and their meanings in the politics and institutions of development in ways that are not uniquely utilitarian, but also not only symbolic. Though largely framed in the language of

development analytics, the deeper question is about newer ways of thinking of nature and more just interactions that can underpin the societies we would like imagine might come in the future..

Let me turn back to Clio for a moment. The nature of epics, as readers of the Iliad and the Odyssey, the Lusiads, the Popul Vuh, Icelandic sagas among others will know, is not a narrative of triumphs: they involve winners and losers, they are not stories of justice, they are stories of capriciousness and, pointless as well as noble courage. Massive events can be triggered by worthy as well as stupid goals even if they are not masquerading as important ones. What is important is that they spool out in complicated ways that have little to do with what looks like simple causal relations.

It is also important to note that Epics are stories of scale and interconnection. They are not village myths. They were a means of communicating different ways of being in novel places, and that this did not always work out well for everyone. And the scale, like that of the Mediterranean, as described by Braudel, was the scale of history. And like in horse racing, in history (and in evolution) sometimes being lucky was better than being good. History as flow, is good at producing mosaics, and along with Sta Rosalia, localities. They both honor evolution.

This brings us to the other muse of history, Sta Rosalia. Sta Rosalia was a non -descript Sicilian saint re-beatified by the great ecologist and the "father" of modern American ecology, EG Hutchinson, as the Patron Saint of evolutionary biology, (biodiversity and ecology were sort of tacked on later) on the occasion of his selection as the President of the American Ecological Society. Hutchinson's inaugural address "Homage to Sta Rosalia or why are there so many animals" (1959) moved Rosalia from the obscurity of provincial fame as a cave dwelling recluse whose relics were known as vanquishers of plague, to a kind of Goddess of biodiversity. Inspired by the diversity and complexity he observed in a pond below Rosalia's troglodite abode, Hutchinson pondered the plethora of aquatic insects, and why and how this came to be. Rosalia's reinvention was a most useful one since she, — well, actually Hutchinson — raises the questions of biological history, transformation and evolution, and profoundly engaged the ways that the diversity and more especially the ecologies — the inter-relationships — of life are produced. He would go on to explore the dynamics of complexity, and was an early analyst of what would later be called ecological systems theory, and a prescient alarmist about climate change (Slobodkin). He would focus on the interactions of organisms with the non-living as well as the biotic world mediated by each other and reflected in processes and outcome of change that we call evolution.

His paper, and its dedication to Sta Rosalia is a meditation on the engines of life and conditions of diversity and why he believes that the forces that generate diversity and complexity

underpin a kind of macro and dynamic stability, what we might now call resilience in the face of strong evolutionary and ecological pressures that manifested in that little pond, on a pretty small island, at the foot of a cave when Hutchinson was twenty one. Neither Clio nor Rosalia are producing narratives about the idea of progress, by the way, but rather about questions of mosaic worlds transformed by actions of many agents, in which the central protagonists include the ensembles "nature" and "time". For Clio and Rosalia, nature and time are intimates and in fact are the deep mirroring identities of both. Everything: the environment, history, politics, each other, is an agent of change and in it all sits the question of chance and the assaults of daily life: the tempests that propel Ulysses boats, the storm blown out of Paradise — progress — that pins the wings of Walter Benjamin's Desolation Angel, the problem Paris' taste in women that sets off the Trojan war, an asteroid, an exploding volcano, the daily combustion of carbon that died millions of years ago and now kill glaciers and with rising atmospheric heat, maybe as many as 30% of the planet's species(WWF 2012)

Both Clio and Rosalia tell us that the past is important: that they set up the "priors" as Bayesian statisticians would say, the key approach in much model building that shape the conditions of possibility, the probabilities in and of scenarios. Many of the contributions in this volume form elements of an emergent political ecology a discipline increasingly taking its inspirations from the twinned forces of Clio and Rosalia, each increasingly now shaping the contours of each others realms. The authors in this volume, unconsciously still. and struggling with many new modalities owe homage to Clio and Rosalia, and what might be called in our archeology of the future — not the anthropocene — a smear of geology, but rather the ecologies of history.

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