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Hijos de la Selva/Sons of the Forest - Federico Bossert and Diego Villar

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Hijos de la Selva: La fotografía etnográfica de Max Schmidt
Sons of the Forest: The ethnographic photography of Max Schmidt
Federico Bossert and Diego Villar; Viggo Mortenson, editor. 2013.

Santa Monica, CA: Perceval Press. 136 p., 21 figures, 82 photos, introduction, bibliography.
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This strange and melancholy book raises a series of discomfiting questions. It is devoted to the ethnographic field experience and anthropological scholarship of the author Max Schmidt (born, 1874, Germany; died, 1950, Paraguay). A biographical essay and scholarly overview occupies its first 50 pages, while the latter 70 or so present a series of photographic plates, meticulously reproduced from Schmidt's original glass-plate negatives (housed at the Museo Etnográfico Andrés Barbero –MEAB– in Asunción, Paraguay). All text is given in Spanish and in English (the translator for the latter is the English anthropologist John Palmer). The book is published by Perceval Press, owned by the actor Viggo Mortensen, and was edited by Argentine anthropologists Federico Bossert and Diego Villar with the close consultation of the MEAB's director of many years, Adelina Pusineri. Mortensen's support for the project is related to his interest in the indigenous peoples of the Chaco, a result of the portion of his childhood spent in rural Argentina.

The book is devotedly aestheticized, with beautiful endpapers made of photographs of Schmidt's fieldnotes juxtaposed with woven karaguata bags made by Chacoan people and presumably collected by Schmidt himself. The maps, illustrations, and photo images accompanying the introductory essay are similarly elegiac: the flotsam and jetsam of old-timey fieldwork nestle along the bottom edge of each page that is not otherwise occupied with endnotes. This loving romanticization makes a rather eerie match to the photos that follow, which are almost without exception dispiriting. Squalid environs, shabby tatters of clothing, tentatively posed Indians gazing warily at the camera, and from time to time the awkward buzzard form of Schmidt himself, inevitably looking hunched and miserable. There are a few snapshots of natural merriment, a glimpse here and there of what seems to be relaxation, ease, and contentment, but not many. The images chosen for the front and back covers are similarly disquieting. On the front, an old Nivaklé man turns three quarters of the way to the camera: is his direct gaze, somewhat cloudy with cataracts, defiant? Or is his oblique stance defensive? On the back, Schmidt's looming shadow, hands busy with his camera, occupies the lower third of an otherwise blurry and unremarkable shot of a thatch-roof dwelling. The legs and feet of a woman are visible, as are a couple of partial human shadows.

Add to this the resoundingly old-fashioned title, "Sons of the Forest,", and one has a text that seems ripe for critique if not condemnation. And yet, the accompanying essay by Bossert and Villar – which one fears will be little read, especially when the point of the book seems to be the images (subtitle, "The ethnographic photography of Max Schmidt") – is not only worthy of attention on its own merits, but in juxtaposition with the photos is a testament to the way in which anthropological knowledge does not always bear the relationship we wish that it might to its own conditions of production. If the facts of Schmidt's career as it is presented in the essay are to be credited, he was a disastrous fieldworker – prone to misfortune, inept at establishing rapport, a hopeless (if wry) romantic about Indians and repeatedly disillusioned by their actualities. He was an even greater failure as a professional scholar – he did not obtain an academic position in Germany, he was only very precariously employed in South America, and ended his days in Asunción in desperate poverty, attached

semi-officially to the Museo Etnográfico Andrés Barbero, subsisting on a "plate of peas" a day, dressed in a threadbare suit brought with him from Germany which was remarkable for the venerability of its "cooking-oil stains" (Baldus, quoted in Bossert and Villar: 53). He died penniless, alone, and (this is not an awful joke, but the awful truth) leprous.

Schmidt was also, on the anthropological merits, correct again, and again, and again. An heir to the intellectual tradition of Adolf Bastian and Karl von der Steinen, Schmidt remained a convinced proponent of the psychic unity of mankind that is paradoxically expressed through the manifold of particular cultural expressions. As historical diffusionists came to hold sway in German ethnology, Schmidt continued to insist on empirical data-collection as the only basis for theorizing, versus the conjecturing of histories on thin evidentiary bases (Bossert and Villar: 10-11). He was eager, then, to get to the field, and first traveled to Brazil in the first decade of the twentieth century. When he returned, he wrote a doctoral thesis on Arawakan society that pulled together evidence from material culture, agricultural practice, language, and social organization in order to propose a dynamic model of what we might today call sociogenesis in pre-Columbian lowland South America. As Bossert and Villar have it, "it conceived of the Arawak as a hybrid conglomeration of intermingled, essentially mestizo societies. As such, it departed from the ideal equation according to which one ethnic group = one territory = one language = one culture (and equation which, let it be said in passing, the modern social sciences would come to impugn)" (Villar & Bossert: 27). In fact, Schmidt's work on the Arawak continues to be cited – in a sense has been rediscovered – in the context of exciting contemporary archaeological and ethnohistorical work on the unexpected social complexity of the lowland South American past.

Back in Germany, Schmidt, never securely placed academically in any event, eventually found himself badly out of step with a Nazifying academic climate and returned to South America in 1929. With the outbreak of the Second World War, this exile became permanent (Villar & Bossert: 37). Schmidt was invited to Asunción in 1931 by Andrés Barbero in order to help found the ethnographic museum which now bears the latter's name. At the close of the War of the Chaco (1932 – 1935), he visited the environs of decommissioned military camps housing Chaco indigenous peoples displaced by the war. The photos taken on these sojourns are particularly upsetting. It does not seem that Schmidt saw in any way that it might be the ethnographer's task to advocate for or assist indigenous peoples and there is no reaching for pathos in his photographs. One can only conclude that the editors found this affectless approach compelling. For me, it bordered on repellent and remains especially so as I try to reconcile it with Schmidt's output. Somehow, Schmidt was also on these strange stiff expeditions able to record apt and revelatory information about inter-indigenous inter-ethnic dynamics in the Chaco and to propose a sophisticated theory of endogenous "multiculturalism" (though he didn't call it that, of course) that anticipates the most putatively cutting-edge ideas of the present moment in anthropological scholarship.

How is it that this cold fish was such a good ethnologist? One wishes his rejection of Nazism had been paired with a warmer, more sympathetic sort of character generally. Given that he lived the life of an academic outsider to such a tee, it would be satisfying if it were possible to accompany his posthumous scholarly vindications with a more general redemption of the man himself. This book makes a mighty attempt, suggesting at the end Schmidt's life, despite everything, was "surely joyous" (Bossert and Villar: 53). To this reader, that seems profoundly unlikely. But that is not to say the effort made manifest in the book falls flat. Not at all. In fact, the effect left is haunting and hard to shake.