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An Amazonianist and his history

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Peter Gow was 17 in 1975 when punk music appeared in the UK and which he credits, in his second book *An Amazonian Myth and its History* (2001), with inspiring in his generation the sort of historical consciousness that led them to thoroughly re-assess the sort of anthropology they were being taught at university. Brian McLaren, who had managed the band New York Dolls, returned to the UK. McLaren co-owned a clothing store called Sex on King's Road, London, with his partner, Vivienne Westwood. McLaren also managed a little-known band called the Strand until he recruited Johnny Rotten as their frontman and renamed them the Sex Pistols. In 1976, when Pete turned 18, the Sex Pistols released the song *Anarchy in the UK* and performed at Manchester's Lesser Free Trade Hall to an audience that went on to create the bands The Buzzcocks, Joy Division, The Fall, and The Smiths. A concurrent band, The Clash, would also be created, about which Pete was more enthusiastic. This musical transformation came on the heels of the 1973-1974 stock market crash, which was the largest downturn since the Great Depression until the 2007-2008 crash.

Pete was not a member *per se* of the punk scene but lived on its margins. When Juan Pablo bought him a photo album documenting the London scene, Pete could identify people and places. Yet, the aesthetic shock produced by punk was more important than as a mere context for his intellectual maturation. As he writes in *An Amazonian Myth and its History* to explain how he had conceived his initial fieldwork project with Yine people¹,

“we found this older tradition of anthropology to be boring. That was no small point, for this was the heyday of punk music, and punk music had taught us that boredom was a very reliable guide in the identification of all forms of knowledge that were irrelevant to understanding the world we saw around us and our places within it” (Gow, 2001: 5).

Post-war British social anthropology was the “older tradition” he refers to here, especially as it culminated in *African Political Systems* (Evans-Pritchard and Fortes 1940). This “older tradition” seemed intrinsically tied up with a British Empire that was crumbling down. A young Peter Gow thought anthropology should change to be up to the task of a de-colonised world, with which he thought Marxism might be able to help. Already as an undergraduate in Cambridge he had become fascinated with Amazonia, due not only to the influence of the Hugh-Joneses, but also to Françoise Barbira Freedman, to his first visit to Peru in 1978 as part of the Cambridge expedition led by Dilwyn Jenkins, and to his first encounters with Ayahuasca. When he returned to Peru in 1979, Pete wanted to document a history from below of Yine people suffering under slavery, following in the footsteps of Marxian anthropologist Stefano Varese's *La Sal de los Cerros* (1968). Yet, more important even than the discovery of punk music, and against his youthful Marxism, it was fieldwork that forced him to come to terms with a very different way of making sense of history—one where, for example, slavery could be considered “civilizing” and where the blood of kinship, not that of suffering, was

1. Over time, Yine has become the term that the people Pete called Piro in much of his work have chosen to identify themselves and be identified as.

history. He dedicated his PhD thesis, under Joana Overing's guidance at the LSE, later re-written and published as *Of Mixed Blood* (1991), to making sense of what that meant. Historical consciousness remained his main object of study throughout his career. He parted ways definitively with Marxist (and post-Marxist) anthropology, though he kept calling himself a Marxist politically and voting for Trotskyist parties when he could.

Pete's Marxism, even going into the field, was unorthodox, much like that of Scottish poet—and co-founder of the National Party of Scotland—Hugh MacDiarmid, whose *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle* (2008 [1926]) Pete took with him to the field. Another unorthodox Marxist and anthropologist of Amazonia, Janet Siskind, shaped his understanding of fieldwork more durably than Varese. His first article in English is an extended argument with her analysis of the role of hunting and sex in Sharanahua society (Gow, 1989), and he returns to her work in a later article, an essay on the epistemology of anthropology (Gow, 2009), where he quotes at length the following passage:

“Romance is a form of insanity in which one projects onto another a response to needs unmet and ignores the reality of the other person. The romance of fieldwork is no exception ... Just as the delusions of romance may be the only way in which it is possible for two people to justify the attempt to get to know one another, the romantic view of the field throws the anthropologist into an interaction with his people” (Siskind, 1973: 18).

Further in that introduction, she points out that this first moment of mutual fascination between the ethnographer and her informants soon leads to a recognition of the limits of romance, or rather of the role that limits played in sustaining romance: it was because the ethnographer could cross limits imposed on members of the society that she could be romanticized, and it is because that society could take the ethnographer beyond his limits that he could romanticize them. Such recognition makes knowledge possible, and Siskind's conclusion has clearly guided much of Pete's approach to indigenous Amazonian societies and their history:

“The third stage of ethnography then is to see oneself in the primitive and the primitive in oneself, to open one's eyes to the restrictions that determine primitive life and to acknowledge that we are too restricted. This view leads to an understanding and respect for the Sharanahua's desire for Peruvian things and ways. It is not that who they may become, if in several generations they are acculturated, will be better. It is not that Peruvian or our own society is superior to theirs. It is a respect for humans drawn to transcend the limits of their society, as we may be driven to transcend ours” (Siskind, 1973: 20).

At the time, Joanna Overing was already one of the most exciting representatives of a new form of Amazonian ethnography. When Pete became her student, she had already written a review article of existing Amazonian scholarship (Overing, 1981) which would remain programmatic for the next 40 years alongside the one written around the same time by Seeger, Da Matta, and a young Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (Seeger et al., 1979). Key to Overing's approach was an attentiveness to everyday life, affects and speech, marked by Pierre Clastres' work as much as by feminism and early post-modernism, in order to showcase the subtle ways in which hierarchies were both set up and dismantled in Amazonian societies. Pete carried this through in his emphasis on intersubjectivity and kinship. His friendship with Christina Toren also profoundly influenced his work throughout his career. Coming from a background in psychology, Christina elaborated over the years a profound anthropological theory of cognition that integrates Merleau-Pontean phenomenology, psychoanalysis, developmental psychology, and neuropsychology (see Toren, 1999). Pete's rediscovery of Claude Lévi-Strauss as a thinker of history and the phenomenological approach he deploys in *An Amazonian Myth in History* are inconceivable without this life-long intellectual dialogue with Christina.

Pete's work was also fundamentally oriented by a dialogue with Brazilian anthropologists. It had long been clear to him that Brazil was the home of some of the best anthropology being written through the 1990s and 2000s and he was astonished at how long it would take his

British and US colleagues to catch on. His was not an exoticising fascination for an anthropology from the Global South but a very sincere admiration grounded in his knowledge both of Amazonian societies and of what was coming out of the Museu Nacional. He co-elaborated the concept of “perspectivism” out of discussions with Eduardo Viveiros de Castro and Tania Stolze Lima, and reformulated the Malinowskian concept of “ethnographic theory” with Marcio Goldman. He was particularly attentive to the Levi-Straussian legacy in Brazil which had preserved much that had been lost in France and never really understood elsewhere.

His return to Scotland in 2003 marked the beginning of a new research program. “I know what an anthropology of Amazonia, fit for Amazonia, looks like” he would say, “but what anthropology does Scotland need?” It was clear to him that the dismissal of Scottish culture as an “invented tradition” or an “imagined community” coming out of the British Marxism of Hobsbawm and Anderson would not do. He sought to examine the historical transformations undergone by Scottish society over the past few centuries, much as he had shown in *Purús Song* (Gow 2006) that the Peruvian and Brazilian nation-states were not arbitrarily imposed onto Yine people but constructed in parts on the back of their social organization and interests, whilst also transforming them. Some of that project meant rearticulating what the anthropology of Amazonia owed to the emergence of anthropology in the Scottish Enlightenment (see Gow 2009). Some of it also meant applying to Scottish culture the same tools of structural analysis that had initially been deployed in Amazonia (see Gow 2018). That project remains unfinished.

His untimely death also prevents us from being able to see the completed version of the manuscript for his third book, *Audacious Innovations in Peruvian Amazonia: An Ethnographic Theory of Acculturation*, borrowing Lévi-Strauss’ phrase² (1976: 339). This book, which he saw as the third in a trilogy that started with *Of Mixed Blood* (1991), provides us with an extension of the arguments in his previous books, mediated by having had a cadre of students that worked in the same area of the Peruvian Amazon where he did:

“Changes associated with modernity, such as the loss of indigenous cultural traditions and life ways, the emergence of new social identities, the development of small towns, conversion to Christianity, or the dramatic urbanization of the region’s population, all these things that are most opposed to our images of indigenous Amazonian peoples, I argue, are expectable consequences of how these same indigenous Amazonian people think about the world and of the potential for social relations within it. These are the audacious innovations in Peruvian Amazonia” (Gow. n.d.: 4).

Pete had returned to the Bajo Urubamba valley in 2017, as part of a collaborative intercultural research workshop organised by SHARE Amazónica, a collective of anthropologists that included three of his former students. The workshop was organized in NOPOKI (“I have arrived” in Asháninka language), which at the time was a training school in the town of Atalaya for intercultural bilingual educators that would soon expand to other degrees. Participants included NOPOKI students and professors, as well as representatives from different Indigenous communities in the Bajo Urubamba, as well as academics from different parts of Peru, Europe, and the USA. Before the event, we were able to visit Santa Clara (previously known as Santo Domingo) where Pete had spent most of his fieldwork in the area. It was a real privilege to experience the happiness with which he was received by his Yine friends or their surviving children, and the many stories recounted during what would be his last visit to the area. This was only a confirmation of their appreciation for Pete. Juan Pablo, who carried out fieldwork in the area, had already witnessed their loving memories of his time there. In 2007, a Yine *comadre* of Pete’s presented her condolences to Juan Pablo (who had by then become Peter’s *sobrino* to those that had met him in the 1980s) as she believed that he had died “in that airplane that flew into a building in the country of whites”. That is, during the attacks on the Twin Towers in 2001. That is why, she

2. “The sociologist must, however, always bear in mind that primitive institutions are not only capable of conserving what exists, or of retaining briefly a crumbling past, but also of elaborating audacious innovations, even though traditional structures are thus profoundly transformed” (Levi-Strauss 1976:339).

affirmed, he had not been back to visit them. Juan Pablo wrote to Pete and he came back to visit a year later.

After the meeting in Atalaya he collaborated with some of his former students to write a research proposal for a comparative study of how Indigenous Peoples in Peru were dealing with the governance regime imposed on them through the *Comunidades Nativas* (Native Communities) that have been recognised in the Peruvian Amazon since the 1970s. The project would have included students who worked in different regions of the Peruvian Amazon, in collaborative work with different communities. In Atalaya, Pete had personally seen how the centrality of money in everyday life in *Comunidades* had affected understandings of kinship, exchange, and education, which he had experienced in his time in the Bajo Urubamba. Upon his last visit in 2017, Atalaya province had the highest demographic growth in the whole of Peru, had the largest number of illegal roads and airstrips, had become the base for drug cartels pushed out from other regions by the Peruvian army, continued to be a centre for illegal timber trade, and was in the area of impact of hydrocarbon extraction sites.

His intellectual engagement with the people of the Bajo Urubamba continued with the publication in Spanish by SHARE Amazónica of *De sangre mezclada: Parentesco e historia en la Amazonía peruana* (Gow, 2020), the translation of his first book. His final article on the peoples of the area—a comparative piece of how a Yine oral history becomes an Asháninka one—will likely be published next year.

The essays in this special issue were all written by students of Pete in the immediate aftermath of his untimely death. This combined effort is a celebration of his work and its continued relevance and productivity to anthropological engagement with Lowland South America and beyond. Pete's work was profoundly concerned with social transformation and historical consciousness as rooted and expressed in intersubjectivity and aesthetic forms. Each of us chose one or more articles spanning Pete's career to explore these same issues based on our own work. Like Pete's interests, our contributions range from art to geopolitics, from ritual identity to the impact of titling on sociality, and from the changing role of history in Amazonian ethnography to the changing role of Amazonian ethnography in history.

Our aim in foregrounding Pete's students was not hagiographic, but rather to show the diversity of approaches and directions that we have followed, as well as to offer responses, at times quite critical, and updates from an ever-changing Amazonia. An article by Victor Cova on Pete's Scottish articles could not be included due to a variety of factors but will hopefully find a home elsewhere. We have also included a transcription of an interview that took place in Dundee in 2017 by Ana Maria R. Gomes, Paulo Maia Figueiredo, Pedro Rocha A. Castro and Roberto R. Romero Jr. Leif Grünewald and Luis Felipe Torres kindly wrote reviews of *Of Mixed Blood* (1991) and *An Amazonian Myth and its History* (2001). We are looking forward to a special issue of *Revista Campos* which will see the light of day later this year and will hopefully provide even further perspectives on the legacy of Pete's work.

The special issue has nine articles, written by thirteen of Pete's students, spread across Latin America and Europe. Two of the articles address his treatment of intersubjectivity. The first, written by Giovanna Bacchiddu, Elizabeth Ewart and Courtney Stafford-Walter, extends the argument presented in "Helpless: The Affective Precondition of Piro social life" (Gow, 2002) concerning mourning, grief, and loss from the Upper Amazon to other sub-regions of Indigenous South America (Guyana, Southern Chile and Central Brazil) and more broadly to a phenomenology of intersubjectivity. The authors show how mutual availability, collaboration, care and co-presence continuously must be produced and reproduced against the inevitability of death and dissolution. The second, written by Paolo Fortis and Margherita Margiotti, takes up Pete's argument concerning "Piro Designs" (Gow, 1999) and questions

the limits of taking “painting as meaningful action” in relation to a phenomenologically and psychoanalytically inflected approach to intersubjectivity.

Both Casey High and Magnus Course articulate the impact of Pete’s approach to Amazonian history and historical consciousness on their own work with Indigenous people in South America and beyond. High takes up Pete’s discussion of “images of history in Western Amazonia” (Gow, 1993) to better understand his point, already present in the last chapter of *Of Mixed Blood* (1991), that the ethnographic interest in history should not be about contextualizing ethnographic material but about exploring Indigenous People’s experiences of their past and problematizing the very idea of history-as-context. Course follows this with a discussion of Pete’s “Puru’s Song”, a critique of prevalent approaches to the nation as “imagined” or “invented” by intellectuals who thereby would have imposed it on Indigenous People and marginalized them, and how it inspired his own work with Mapuche people and in Scotland. Both High and Course emphasize the ways that Pete stood against the prevailing current of fashionable academic theories, which repeatedly failed to take seriously Indigenous agency in history.

Reyes and Villagra Carron turn to Pete’s work on myth and ritual. Antonio Reyes explores the role that the mediation of relations between humans and divinized ancestors by ritual specialists plays in processes through which O’dam people in Northern Mexico construct personhood. In doing so he replicates the approach adopted by Pete in his article “Land, People and Paper in Western Amazonia” (1995). Rodrigo Villagra Carron focuses instead on one of the most general theoretical and methodological statements by Pete, his discussion of Levi-Strauss’s “Canonical Formula” (Gow, 2014) and extends it to a comparison of puberty rituals within the ensemble of societies that comprise the Gran Chaco. These two studies, based in two very different ethnographic locations and working at different scales together exemplify the continued fruitfulness of Pete’s peculiar combination of Levi-Straussian structuralism and Malinowskian ethnography.

The articles by Krokoszynska, Sarmiento Barletti and Killick, and by Hewlett can be seen as a synthesis of all that precedes. Like the other articles, they further Pete’s theoretical, methodological, and political approach, but this time within the same ethnographic region, thereby intensifying the question of the historicity of his own approach to historicity. Krokoszynska’s article explores the “ex-Cocama” logic described by Pete (2003) in an urban context in the Peruvian Amazon and delineates masterfully the relation between ethnicity, history and schooling. Sarmiento Barletti and Killick compare their own engagement with the neighbouring Asháninka/Ashéninka people to Pete’s analysis of the role of the *Comunidad Nativa* among the Yine people; and at a time of expanding extractive frontiers, population boom, and more restrictive legal frameworks. Finally, Hewlett returns to one of Pete’s first articles, “The Perverse Child” (1989), to interrogate questions of desire, production, and exchange among Amawaka people who rely ever more upon the market economy and government programs.

Pete retired from the University of St Andrews in 2017. He did not feel that it was possible any longer to do the sort of anthropology he had set out to do in the 1980s. Parts of it was due to a changed higher education system focused more on the impact of research and the customer experience of the students than on, you know, research and teaching. Parts of it was also due to a discipline that had a little too willingly adapted to these demands and was slowly morphing into “qualitative research”. He was particularly appalled by the apparent complete consecration of what he thought of as the worst of the 1980s so-called “crisis of representation” in the debates around the ontological turn. He thought that anthropologists of the future might have to hide in NGOs and the nonprofit sector because academia had become so inimical to research. “Punk is dead”, as the Crass song goes (and in later years Pete far preferred Charles Mingus), and perhaps anthropology could not survive neoliberalism.

Now, Pete has died too, leaving to those of us who stayed behind the burden of transforming his work into something else, in and beyond anthropology, in and beyond Amazonia.

We remember Pete's often told story of having arrived in the Bajo Urubamba to 'help' Yine people organise politically. However, his "attempts at radical political engagement were brought to an abrupt halt when an important [Yine] leader told me quietly but sternly 'We are happy for you to live here among us, learning how we live. That's fine. But we don't want you to tell us what we should do.'" We take this story as not only a pedagogical warning of the arrogance of the young (and not-so-young) ethnographer, but of his style as a supervisor and later as a colleague. Listen and discuss, but do not let them tell you what to do, even less what to think.

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