

# Cultural Geography as a Research Agenda for Peru <sup>1</sup>

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## INTRODUCTION

Cultural geography offers a packet of ideas which seem extraordinarily suited to elucidating the splendiferous diversity of Peru and to contributing insights into some of the country's problems. This subset of human geography has been dominated by the partisans of the so-called "Berkeley school" whose founder was Carl O. Sauer (1889-1975), now generally considered to be one of the most outstanding geographers of this century. He was fascinated with the imprint on landscapes of indigenous New World traditions which in Peru is etched more deeply possibly than anywhere else in the Americas.

Sauer's background and temperament predisposed him to find meaning in preindustrial countrysides. Growing up in a placid but not uncultured town in Missouri near St. Louis, he had a mixed graduate student experience at the very new University of Chicago. By his mid-30s, he held a professorship at the University of California, Berkeley, which liberated him from the geographical orthodoxies of his time (Kenzler 1987). Sauer's inspiration came chiefly from European authors, notably F. Ratzel, S. Passarge, O. Schlüter, and J. Brunhes, but he pursued his chosen topics with Promethean originality. Even those who never met him have come to appreciate Sauer for his penetrating analysis, power of synthesis, clarity of ideas and unwillingness to erect barriers between disciplines. Sauer initiated "an endless possibility of discourse on land and life" (Speth 1987, 11) and passed that sacred fire on to a significant number of other people.

Rejecting a deterministic chain of cause and effect that prevailed in North American geography through most of the decade of the 1920s, Sauer saw human life on earth in the context of techniques, intentions and aspirations. People, not nature, define resources and determine their uses. Moreover, any place has undergone successive waves of settlement by specific cultural groups that define for themselves the meaning of a resource. Sauer's methods were designed to elucidate this temporal sequence as much as its spatial definition. He felicitously combined direct observation of the landscape and sifting of the documentary record. Not only dusty colonial archives tell us about the past, but so can kitchen middens, relict stands of trees, soil cuts, or peasants relaxing with a cup of *chicha* and talking about their ways of doing things.

Most of the field studies carried out by Sauer and his graduate students focused principally on Mexico and the Caribbean. In 1942, he took the opportunity offered by a Rockefeller Foundation grant to learn, first-hand, about Western South America.<sup>2</sup> Of the five countries visited on that trip, Peru impressed Sauer as offering the most interesting problems for research. He stayed in the country about six weeks, half of this time in Lima and half elsewhere, mainly the areas around Cuzco, Arequipa, and Trujillo (Figure 1). Two substantive pieces of scholarship benefited from this observational visit, both published in the *Handbook of South American Indians* (Sauer 1950a, 1950b). One organized the biophysical regions of South America; the other combined his observations of the native crops of the New World with a thorough grasp of the diffuse literature on that topic. Although Sauer never wrote for publication in Spanish, Latin American colleagues with whom he had contact learned something of his research.<sup>3</sup> One of these acquaintances was Emilio Romero who, as President of the Sociedad Geográfica de Lima, briefly memorialized Sauer for his "*gran obra renovadora en el campo de geografía*" (Romero 1975, 11).<sup>4</sup>



Fig 1. Carl Sauer (age 52) stands next to an irrigated manioc plant at Hacienda Ocucaje near Ica, Peru. This estate in the desert south of Lima has been known principally for its grapes and wine, but Sauer's attention was first and foremost directed toward the native achievements of the New World. (Photo taken in 1942, courtesy of Jonathan D. Sauer.)

Besides his own publications, many of timeless value, the legacy of Carl Sauer lives on in the three subsequent generations of students who call themselves cultural geographers, most of whom are North Americans. They have codified, reworked, and expanded that rather amorphous sphere of geographical knowledge whose content deals with everything that amalgamates the geographical perspective and the anthropological concept of culture. However, in real terms, research in cultural geography has tended to focus on certain themes. Seven such clusters are briefly referred to here as they relate to Peru, suggestive of the inexhaustible possibilities for illuminating one of the world's most fascinating lands.<sup>5</sup>

## **MAJOR THEMES IN CULTURAL GEOGRAPHY**

*People in the Exploitation of their Habitat through Time*

The land of Peru has seen the emergence of civilization in a manner documented for no more than half a dozen other places in the world. The key to this cultural advance over the past 3,000 years was the domestication of plants and animals. Following the example set by Carl Sauer, cultural geographers have given scholarly attention to this process, which stands as the most significant intervention of man in nature. It is not only prehistoric. Andean farmers continue to manipulate plants in their fields and gardens in a way that gives insight into how their ancestors turned weeds into cultigens. And now the genetic variability contained in the remarkable range of native crops and varieties has become highly desirable hereditary material for plant breeders and biotechnologists who are pushing domestication to new frontiers. Much more needs to be found out about these crops and the possibilities they offer to help feed the world.

A different aspect of this broad theme revolves around permutations in land use and the mechanisms that trigger them. Intensification is manifested in some places in Peru by an increased emphasis on potato cultivation, which yields many more carbohydrates per unit area than cereals, or by an increase from one to two crops a year on the same plot. How many of these changes correspond to population increases and the need to feed more people? More common than intensification in the Peruvian highlands is the reverse process of land abandonment. Increasingly, un-irrigated slope land is left uncultivated. In some areas, this change is mostly the result of a diminishing supply of family labor as young people leave the land to seek a new life in the cities.

### ***People as the Causal Agent in the Transformation of Natural Landscapes***

The densely settled parts of Peru manifest notable changes in vegetation, soils, hydrology, and geomorphology that were instigated by human action. This theme has special relevance for environmental conservation. The Sierra below 4,000 m elevation once possessed a continuous tree cover that past deforestation has removed. White (1986) came to this same conclusion just on the basis of prolonged field observation of peasant agricultural practices in the Department of Cuzco. The task of preserving the remaining vestiges of forest begins with locating and describing each one. The tree species that comprised this erstwhile mountain forest have themselves become quite uncommon; for example, *quishuar* (*Buddleia incana*) is now rarely seen in a purely wild state.

In some places in Peru, ancient farmers modeled the mountain slopes and waterlogged pampas to increase the possibilities for sustained cultivation in otherwise hostile terrain. Detailed studies of terraces, many of which are in a state of partial or total abandonment, are still few in number. In the Department of Arequipa, a major, multidimensional study -- which can serve as a prototype of what cultural, historical, and ecological questions to pose -- has focused on the elaborate bench terrace complex in the Colca Valley (Denevan 1987; Treacy 1987). With more than 18 million ha of land in the Peruvian Andes moderately or severely eroded (ONERN 1984), terraces still have an important role to play in soil conservation (Portocarrero Maisch 1986).

Other man-made landforms are raised fields constructed to grow crops where poor drainage would otherwise exclude them. Over the past three decades, aerial photography has revealed the presence of these *camellones* in Peru, Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, Venezuela, Surinam, Belize, and Mexico, suggesting a common response to a widespread need for agricultural land. On the shores of Lake Titicaca, these prehistoric features cover more than 80,000 ha (Smith, Denevan, Hamilton 1981). While most ridged fields there are uncultivated today, experimental studies have shown their high productive potential (Erickson 1983).

### ***Visible Cultural Elements in the Humanized Landscape***

Landscapes structured by human action always possess visible traces of the prior occupation by cultural groups. Man-made constructions of all kinds remain as authentic expressions of the past continued into the present. Peru's rural and urban landscapes are replete with structures from various periods, including the

prehispanic and colonial. One example is the water-powered grist mill, based on a technology introduced into the Sierra by the Spaniards to grind wheat into flour (Gade 1971). Although they have fallen into disuse in many areas, the structures themselves survive in large numbers. In the Province of Acomayo (Department of Cuzco), these now silent mills stand as the only tangible evidence of the region's former importance as a supplier of wheat and flour to the cities of Cuzco and Puno. Today in Acomayo, land formerly in *trigales* has either been abandoned or replaced by barley grown under contract for sale to the Cuzco brewery. Beer drinking supplants corn *chicha* as the preferred beverage of both urban and rural folk. Wheat and flour imported from abroad have greatly diminished wheat growing in the Sierra. The grist mills too will eventually disappear, but meanwhile they form a record that gives meaning to the human occupancy of place.

The cultural landscape also holds clustered aggregates of buildings that form towns. Many *pueblos*, even the most isolated ones, have as their origin the *reducciones* which were established during the administration of Viceroy Francisco de Toledo to provide a bureaucratic solution to taxation and indoctrination. A large number of questions, some historic, others contemporary, surround these villages: choice of specific sites, internal arrangements, distances to agricultural fields. Early colonial clustering subsequently was followed by population dispersion so that already by the nineteenth century the bulk of the rural population no longer lived in these towns (Gade and Escobar 1982). Much remains to be learned about the reasons for this change.

### ***Geographic Aspects of Non-Material Culture***

Although not always part of the visible landscape, language and religion both have spatial and sometimes ecological dimensions amenable to geographical treatment. Seven to eight million Quechua speakers comprise the Andean world, making Quechua the most important native language in the Americas. The Inca expansion of this linguistic realm was followed in the seventeenth century by spatial contraction. In spite of the official proclamation in 1975 during the Velasco regime making Quechua the second national language of Peru, it continues to lose ground to Spanish. Detailed studies are needed, especially in the north-central highlands, of how, why, and where the geographic boundaries of language adherence are shifting.

The geographic aspects of religion include the spatial organization of churches, religious orders, and pilgrimage flows to regional shrines. In some places Protestant missionary intrusions have resulted in definable clusters of adherents with certain of their own social characteristics. The sanctification of Andean space and natural phenomena among the Inca on the one hand and the European on the other poses interesting cultural-historical questions about the discontinuities of two different cultural traditions as well as the continuities that bespeak the psychic unity of mankind. Subliminal reaction to lightning, for example, shows some intriguing overlaps between the two traditions, which may help to account for the remarkable syncretism of St. James as an Andean sky god (Gade 1983).

### ***Identification of Regional Ensembles***

Another theme focuses on regions as they are delineated and defined by the cultural or physical elements they encompass. The politically defined areas that evolved for administrative purposes poorly serve the needs of the country. Departments and even many provinces include so many disparities in topography, climate, economy, and population that statistics based on those administrative entities are of limited usefulness. New or revised conceptualizations of administrative space have received encouragement from the *Plan de Regionalización* of 1984 whose objective it is to begin decentralizing the economy, administration, and demography away from Lima. Rethinking spatial groupings lies at the heart of our professional preoccupations as geographers. Peru needs a regionalization that takes into account physical and human factors without major regard for present administrative boundaries. This work, if done at a scale of 1:10,000, could define the real *comarcas* of the coast and highlands and lead to a much better understanding of the formidable diversity of Peruvian territory. Out of that reordering of space and place could come vastly

superior administrative units.

### ***Ecological Relationships***

The ties between people and their resource base in specific localities are a major concern in which this work can be carried out. Up to now, one of the rare studies of this sort in Peru has been that carried out by Thomas (1976) in Nuñoa, an Indian-dominated district on the Altiplano that combines agriculture and herding to the advantage of both. These kinds of studies have the potential to provide superb insight into the rationale --though not the origin-- of a range of livelihood activities. Bergman (1980), in a groundbreaking cultural-ecological study, used time inputs to measure energy expenditures in one native Indian community in the Ucayali Valley. Comparative work on energy expenditures of daily tasks such as food processing and firewood collection would give new dimensions to the peasant ecology of specific areas. It would also uncover new ideas on livelihood specializations such as the raising of alpaca in Carabaya, goats in Piura, or the role of the *titora* reed on the shores Lake Titicaca. The survival of many archaic forms or patterns in the Andes are understood when the ecological constraints are sorted out. The Iberian pig or what in Peru is called the *chancho criollo* has had a subsistence niche in peasant agricultural systems for the past four centuries because of its inherent ability to forage, rusticity, and small size (Gade 1987).

An entirely different aspect of ecological relationships involves the concept of verticality in which an Andean community takes advantage of a maximum of environmental levels to enhance its subsistence options and thus security. Curiously, our discipline has done little to refine this concept in spite of the fact that two distinguished geographers, Isaiah Bowman (1916) and Carl Troll (1943), were the scholars who laid down the notion of Andean environments and economy staggered one above the other. Another geographer, Javier Pulgar Vidal (1946, 1987) conceptualized all of Peru in terms of both vertical and horizontal diversity. The result was eight ecological-livelihood regions, instead of the classic three --Coast, Sierra, Selva-- that had been enshrined in usage since the sixteenth century. Still, anthropologists have tended to monopolize the verticality theme to elaborate from it a whole theory of the structure of Andean society. Geographers, who are normally better equipped than anthropologists to study biophysical parameters, have the potential to make important contributions here.

### ***Perception of Space and the Environment***

This perspective, which has developed primarily since the 1960s, emphasizes people as "actors," relegating to the background the researcher's own point of view. Perception studies done in Peru can be especially revealing, for so little is known about the images that people have of spatial or environmental configurations. The highland peasant, riverine inhabitant in the Selva, and the shantytown dweller around Lima each has his or her own sense of the operational space of movement and the resources available in that space. In the Sierra, how finely do peasants organize the ecological divisions of their community? How do they define the geographic scale beyond their own village, whether that be the *patria chica* or the *patria grande*? What mental map does a *huancavelicano* have of the coast and Selva, and how does the shantytown dweller of Villa El Salvador spatially organize Greater Lima?

## **BUILDING BLOCKS AND CULTURAL GEOGRAPHY**

Whatever the theme or topic, cultural geography offers an approach that is based on direct observation in the field, yet one that usually incorporates awareness or knowledge of long-term processes that mesh the past with the present.<sup>6</sup> Though they may not have been known by that rubric, studies in cultural geography have been carried out by Peruvian scholars associated with educational institutions, governmental agencies, or by those working independently.<sup>7</sup> The hundreds of articles that have appeared in the *Boletín de la Sociedad Geográfica de Lima* since its beginnings in 1888 represent the valuable accumulation of a century of learning about Peru. The exploration reports and descriptive monographs that filled many of the earlier volumes of this journal form the necessary base in the advance toward more thematic and analytical studies.

Laying down the bricks of knowledge, piece by piece, in the construction of the geographical edifice is a long-term effort that merits personal reflection. For my part, I would not have invented my first research project in Peru back in 1963 without some parts of that foundation.<sup>8</sup> Formulation of my topic was therefore largely based on what I could read.

A key discovery for me was O. F. Cook's (1916) article on the Peruvian Expedition of 1915 sponsored by the National Geographic Society and Yale University. That splendid account hooked me on the Andean world and its highly telescoped ecology, astonishing crop diversity, and palpable presence of two major civilizations at every turn. This well-illustrated introduction whetted my appetite for whatever else I could find along these lines. Some other writings taught me about crops as they fit into Peruvian culture history (Herrera 1923; Yacovleff and Herrera 1934/35). The impossibility of understanding Andean cultural geography without incorporating a temporal perspective to my incipient project soon became obvious.

I started then to assimilate the colonial chronicles, full of admiration for the sharp observations of several authors, particularly Bernabé Cobo and Felipe Guamán Poma de Ayala. For the much later period of the nineteenth century, I gleaned the terse but revealing field notes of the Milanese geographer Antonio Raimondi, who explored the remote corners of Peru on muleback over a period of 19 years. In addition to the cultural-historical perspective, the zonation study of Tosi (1960) showed the close relationship between altitude, climate, and plant communities. Intensive reading of a wide range of materials helped me to formulate a project that focused on plant use and agriculture in the Vilcanota Valley of the Department of Cuzco, a zone in which the environmental contrasts through space are strong and in which the cultural context began to shift after 1532.

The data and interpretations that resulted from this graduate student effort (Gade 1975) were counter to the developmentalist mentality of the 1960s. Since then, I have been gratified to note the emergence of interest among Peruvians and others in the empirical reality and practicality of native agriculture. A government agency, CONCYTEC (Consejo Nacional de Ciencia y Tecnología), has had an interesting program designed to study and implement the "*sabiduría nativa*" that for so long was in disrepute as hopelessly backward (Torre and Burga 1986). This recent approbation of indigenous knowledge serves to balance the still prevalent assumption that technological innovation introduced from abroad is the only valid way of improving Peruvian agriculture and bolstering the standard of living of rural people.

## FINAL REFLECTIONS

Further research in the *ámbito* that I have sketched can contribute to a better understanding of domestication processes, environmental adaptations, humanized landscapes, regional definitions, and resource perceptions. Although cultural geography is not usually directed to application, some of the insights thus gained can have relevance for Peru beyond generating academic knowledge. Tourism, an important source of livelihood in some areas of the country, can gain from research that discovers or elaborates Peruvian diversity. Cultural geography can also offer points of view on the exaggerated centralization in Lima which has not served Peru well, rampant urbanization which has created a host of environmental problems, land deterioration which threatens future productivity, deprecation of Indian culture which has negatively affected the social fabric, and excessive dependency on foreign aid which has brought with it more disappointments than benefits. In each case, the main contribution of cultural geography is to offer thoughtful, balanced perspectives rather than prescriptions. The Sauerian legacy has largely eschewed bandwagon solutions based on pseudo-modernistic assumptions and has been equally adamant against deterministic thinking, whether that be environmental, technological, or ideological. Efforts made with an innocent eye and sophisticated brain to dispassionately extend the frontier of knowledge on Peruvian land and life are in the long run bound to make an impact.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> This paper was originally presented as "La Geografía Cultural: un Temario Para Conocer el Perú," at the Primer Congreso Internacional de Geografía de las Américas in Lima, Peru, in February, 1988. My remarks were directed especially to Peruvian geographers and students to briefly outline to them the Sauerian tradition within the discipline and to spark their interest in the possibilities that cultural geography holds in uncovering Peru's prodigious diversity and even addressing some of its problems. While my aim was at once informational and hortatory, such a broad schematization could scarcely elaborate on any particular point in the depth that it deserves. In this English translation I have somewhat revised the original Spanish version and added several discursive notes.

<sup>2</sup> Carl Sauer's letters written between January 1 and June 26, 1942, to J. H. Willits of the Rockefeller Foundation offer fascinating commentary on the state of intellectual life in the social sciences at that time in Chile, Bolivia, Peru, Ecuador and Colombia as reflected in the people he met ("from grandee to pigtailed Indian") and the universities, museums, and libraries he visited (West 1982). These reports also tell us much about Sauer's personal and scholarly values. Sauer's profound skepticism about the superiority of the modern (Mathewson 1987) comes through on almost every page. Not much geographical description is found in these letters, but the problems of travel in the Andean countries prompt some interesting asides.

<sup>3</sup> One of the few translations of Carl Sauer's work into Spanish is "Introducción a la Geografía Histórica" (Serie Traducciones No.3, n.d., 38 pp.), prepared by Marta B. de Rezanowski and revised by Alfredo S. Bolsi, then of the Instituto de Geografía at the Universidad Nacional de Nordeste in Resistencia, Argentina. Bolsi prepared a four-page introduction to Sauer's life and ideas to accompany this translation of "Foreword to historical geography" published in 1941. More recently, Hector Rucinke has translated another classic article of Sauer's (1956): *La Educación de un Geógrafo* (Tunja-Bogotá: GEOFUN-EPG, 1987).

<sup>4</sup> Sauer met Emilio Romero in Lima in 1942 and found this son of the Sierra to be uncommonly knowledgeable about Peru and serious about scholarly inquiry. Trained as a lawyer, Romero's main job then was as Director General of the Treasury of Peru. He was also a sometime geography professor and an author of books on Peru.

<sup>5</sup> The *Handbook of Latin American Studies*, *Dissertation Abstracts*, and a number of European bibliographies show that, among Latin American countries over the past quarter century, Peru falls into third place (after Brazil and Mexico) as the focus of foreign-generated theses and publications in the social sciences and sciences. If such scholarly attention were calculated on the basis of national population, Peru would probably be in first place. Either way, such a high degree of international interest reflects the grand possibilities offered by the largest block of surviving indigenous culture in the New World and an exceptional environmental diversity. Political instability, migration, and urbanization phenomena, and a host of economic problems that defy easy solution, also have made Peru a choice place to study Third World development issues. The abundance of international research in Peru has been facilitated by a generally permissive attitude which has allowed foreign scholars --except archaeologists-- to carry out their projects with minimal governmental interference.

<sup>6</sup> Cultural geographers typically use the past to explain the present; historical geographers tend to focus on the past for its own sake. However, not all cultural geographers use retrospection in their analyses, and thus the expression "cultural-historical geography" is not redundant.

<sup>7</sup> One intellectual problem in Peru is the inefficiency of knowledge accrual. Literature retrieval in geography and related fields is difficult because institutional libraries do not subscribe to many foreign journals and

even the Biblioteca Nacional in Lima does not systematically access much of what it should have on Peru. For some Peruvians, the language of publication poses another formidable barrier. The net effect is that efforts to elaborate knowledge in Peru do not often build on work previously carried out. Foreign researchers with a scholarly investment in Peru can fulfill what I believe to be a moral obligation to diffuse their results by donating copies of their publications and translating some of them into Spanish.

<sup>8</sup> My initial research stint in Peru was funded by the Foreign Field Research Program sponsored by the Office of Naval Research and administered by the National Academy of Sciences-National Research Council. This program, although it had a relatively short existence from 1955 to 1966, did much to support the budding research capabilities of young American geographers in cultures other than our own. Thirty-two of the 97 grantees (out of a total applicant pool of 342) did their research in Latin America, three of them in Peru (National Research Council 1973). Another program of similar objectives is needed if American geography of the next generation is to maintain any significant capability for research on foreign lands.

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