

John V. Murra

August 24, 1916 — October 16, 2006

John V. Murra died in his home on October 16, 2006, at the age of 90. Noted for his contributions in historical anthropology and particularly in Andean studies, his loss will be felt in a wide range of communities.

Born Isak Lipschitz in 1916 in Odessa, Ukraine, Murra then grew up in Bucharest, Romania. Expelled from his last year at the lyc ee for belonging to the Social Democratic youth, he eventually received his federal baccalaur at as a privately prepared student, and worked in paper factories in Romania and in Croatia. There he observed the political and ethnic divisions of Serbs, Croats, Gypsies, Bulgarians, Saxons, Greeks, etc. He also had several short stays in jail in 1933-34, once as the only “red” in a group of Iron Guardists, which he survived in part through his knowledge of soccer.

His uncle, a virtuoso musician in Chicago, arranged for Murra to enter the University of Chicago, which he had read about as becoming a radical institution under the presidency of Robert Maynard Hutchins. He arrived at the end of 1934, and soon gravitated to the social sciences, where he found particular interest in the worldwide and comparative scope of anthropology as taught by Fay-Cooper Cole, with a prominent historical dimension. Still using his birth name, Murra graduated in June 1936.

As he recalled later, “nothing in academic life compared with the urgencies of politics,” and that fall Murra joined the International Brigade and went to fight in the Spanish Civil War. That experience added nuance to his political stance:

“Few experiences will do as well as participating in a modern civil war to explore the realities of ‘democratic’ centralism or the strength of national and ethnic ties over class ascription.”

But despite some disillusionment, Murra remained committed to progressive action. He later maintained, “I did not graduate from the University of Chicago. I graduated from the Spanish Civil War.” After the war, he was interned for about six months in camps in France; he was divorced from his first wife during the war, dissolving his formal connection to the United States and leaving him something of a man without a country.

Unable to fight in WWII because of wounds received in Spain, he was finally able to return to Chicago in 1939. At Chicago, Murra, who began to use that name around this time, embraced the historically oriented anthropology of Fay-Cooper Cole, and also worked with Fred Eggan. He completed his Master’s degree in 1942. In 1941, he traveled

to Ecuador with Donald Collier, where he ignited his passion for ethnography in conjunction with ethnohistory. This work led to published contributions in the *Handbook of South American Indians*. In 1942-43, Murra worked with John Dollard and Ruth Benedict interviewing Abraham Lincoln Brigade veterans, and in 1943, he began teaching at Chicago, filling in for Fred Eggan while he was in military service. Although never an Africanist, Murra felt that the contributions of the British social anthropologists working in Africa—which he had learned through Radcliffe-Brown at Chicago—were among the most significant works of the time, and he began teaching a course on “African ethnology” in 1944. He was a deep believer in comparative understanding, and kept up with African scholarship for the rest of his career. As a European who spoke many languages and had lived in many countries, Murra was impatient with what he called North American parochialism. He insisted that his students learn foreign languages.

In 1946, Murra was turned down for U.S. citizenship on the grounds that he had fought with the Spanish Republican Army, which cost him the SSRC grant that would have funded his dissertation research in Ecuador. Murra’s radical history continued to haunt him in the era of McCarthyism; he was eventually granted citizenship in 1950, after a lawsuit, but did not receive a passport until 1956. Denied the possibility of travel to South America, he ultimately chose to write a dissertation that did not involve fieldwork. He defended his dissertation, “The Economic Organization of the Inca State,” in 1955. There Murra first proposed his model of “vertical archipelagos,” a structure of exchange and access to the altitudinally separated resource zones (*pisos ecologicos*) of the Andes that were taken as fundamental to Andean civilizations. The Inca system moved vast amounts of goods through ritual rather than simple trade, and redistribution included products of remote ecological zones and brides trained in the royal institutions. This model has been corroborated in the Andes, where it remains one of the most powerful analyses for the economic and political basis of Andean state formation. In more general form, it was also applied in many other parts of the world, and has been of particular influence in the study of pastoralist societies and precapitalist states.

To support himself through this period, he taught at several universities, including the University of Puerto Rico—during which time he also served as the field director (1948-49) for The People of Puerto Rico project led by Julian Steward—and Vassar College, where administrators defended Murra from the government’s efforts to have him deported. He spent two years in the late 1950s teaching and doing archival research in Peru. He continued traveling, researching and teaching in a series of limited appointments through the early 1960s.

In 1968, John Murra joined the faculty at Cornell University, taking the Andean position opened by the untimely

death of Alan Holmberg. Andean studies at Cornell had long been a major focus, but with a different orientation than Murra's historical interests; in some ways he was "a square peg in a round hole" at Cornell. He found some companionship among his colleagues, particularly with Bernd Lambert and Bob Ascher, but was often on "the other side" in local debates and developed something of a reputation for being ornery. He always particularly liked teaching undergraduates, and felt that he was able to do less of that at Cornell than he had during his peripatetic years. The innovation at Cornell he was most proud of was a course on the history of U.S. anthropology as an institution and a craft rather than as a survey of ethnological theory. Not known for his patience with anyone he saw as naïve, facile, or selfish, Murra nevertheless could be quite generous, and is remembered warmly by many former students and colleagues.

After his retirement from regular teaching in 1982, Murra continued research, and remained an active if increasingly occasional participant in the department even well into the 1990s. He was always active in the international professional societies, and worked continually to improve communications between Latin America and the English-speaking scholarly community. He served as President of the American Society for Ethnohistory (1970-71), the American Ethnological Society (1972-73), and the Institute for Andean Research (1977-83), and gave the Lewis Henry Morgan Lecture in 1969, "Reciprocity and Redistribution in Andean Civilizations." Murra's many stints in Latin American institutions, from the 1950s through his retirement years, reflect a deep commitment to building research and educational institutions and opportunities in the region, a pattern followed by many of the Latin American students whose studies Murra supervised at Cornell. Murra was a founding member of the Instituto de Estudios Peruanos, the Asociación Peruana de Antropólogos, and the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, Ecuador. In 1987, he was awarded the Great Cross of the Order of the Sun by the government of Peru. After Franco's death, Murra was able to renew his passionate connections with Spain, returning several times for research, honorific teaching engagements, and helping fellow veterans of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade revisit the land they had fought for.

John Murra published extensively, and his work touched on many disparate fields. His best known works are probably *The Economic Organization of the Inca State* (1956, 1980; published in Spanish in 1978, and in Italian in 1980); *Cloth and its Functions in the Inca State* (1962); *Current Research and Prospects in Andean Ethnohistory* (1970), and the series of articles from the late 1960s and early 1970s, explicating the model of vertical archipelagos, one of the contributions Murra is best known for today. The other would be his focus on historical perspectives within anthropology; Murra's ethnohistory was a comparative and theoretical approach, but always empirically

grounded in the local, and integrated archaeological, archival, and ethnographic sources. Through close readings of chronicles, lawsuits, and other documents, Murra emphasized the recapture of voices as close as possible to the daily lives and ethnic identities of the colonial-Inca world. He was a strong optimist about the chances of recovering the past; Frank Salomon recalls Murra saying in seminar, “Don’t say lost, say not yet found.”

John Murra was married and divorced twice, leaving no children. His papers are available to researchers at the National Anthropological Archives. John Murra’s legacy will be found in many fields, in many individuals, in the Andes, the United States, and elsewhere.

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