ELOHI

Peuples indigènes et environnement

1 | 2012

Peuples indigènes et environnement

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Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/elohi/213>

DOI: 10.4000/elohi.213

ISSN: 2268-5243

Publisher

Presses universitaires de Bordeaux

Printed version

Date of publication: 1 January 2012

Number of pages: 37-51

ISBN: 978-2-86781-842-4

ISSN: 2431-8175

Electronic reference

Frédéric Dorel, « Nature vs. Culture? », *ELOHI* [Online], 1 | 2012, Online since 01 January 2013, connection on 01 May 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/elohi/213> ; DOI : 10.4000/elohi.213

Nature *vs.* culture?

Several convergent contemporary anthropological approaches

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In both France and in the United States, historians have proven to be somewhat critical of the not so recent book *The Ecological Indian: Myth and History* by Shepard Krech III (1999). They accused Krech of revisionism with regard to the generally accepted idea that Native Americans have always been ecologists and conservationists. Unexpectedly for the lay reader, Krech's hypotheses were far from being disturbing to every scientist. They originated from the wide epistemological self-questioning which took place in the various anthropological schools during the last half of the 20th century in France and in America—mainly in the US and Brazil—from the works of Levi-Strauss to those of Viveiros de Castro to the essays of Geertz, Sahlins, Latour, and Descola. At the same time similar theories could be found in the New Western History with US ethno-historians Cronon and White.

This paper will comment on the development of these theories. Marshall Sahlins, Clifford Geertz, Bruno Latour, Philippe Descola and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, among others, have now formed an informal, but extremely fruitful, think tank with several key points of agreement as well as some noticeable differences of opinion in their global theories on anthropology and its methods.

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They have deeply inspired each other over the last three decades while paying contrasted tributes to founding father Levi-Strauss. Their common understanding of the hybridisation of various scientific approaches and of the necessary development of sociological and anthropological methods has been remarkably successful. Equally in vogue has been their conceptual coup: recognition of the enduring local indigenous ontologies and of the disappearance of the recent, but deeply Western, demarcation between the concepts of nature and culture. If “culture is the human nature” (Sahlins 2008: 104) and if contemporary anthropology eventually acknowledges the theory of the indigenisation of modernity, the peoples encountered by the Europeans are no longer to be presented as innocent victims, unable to cope with the whites and their environment. Rather, they are social groups displaying their own power and history. These conclusions lead us to reconsider not only our understanding of the place of Native peoples in nature, but also the place of nature in mankind.

Krech’s case

Shepard Krech III, currently Professor of Anthropology and Environmental Studies at Brown University, served for ten years as editor of the journal of the American Society for Ethnohistory. In 1999, he published *The Ecological Indian: Myth and History*, which triggered a widespread controversy in the world of Native American Studies and Environmental Studies. Krech asked an apparently revolutionary question: did Americans Indians live in perfect harmony with their natural environment until the Europeans showed up to destroy it, as is commonly accepted? He was questioning the well-known contemporary stereotype of the Ecologically Noble Indian. To him, after having discovered the Cannibal, the Barbarian and the Noble Savage according to their own uncertainties, the Euro-Americans are now defining the Ecological Indian in our times of environmental, social and cultural crisis.

Krech started from the popular cliché of the Crying Indian—from the 1971 *Keep America Beautiful* campaign, crying over the industrial threat to the planet—using the classical stereotype of the Noble Savage romantically associating rationality, vigour, morality, primitiveness and virtue, various merits in tune with contemporary ecology. He dated this inspiration back to the 1960s when Native Americans started to be seen as prophets of an anti-technocratic critique of the Euro-American industrial society. In the wake of James Fenimore Cooper, it was also a point made by late 19th-century and early 20th-century conservationists like Gifford Pinchot and George B. Grinnell supporting cultural ecology. Moreover, Krech demonstrated that the Ecological Indian is a dehumanizing image. The idea that American Indians left no trace of them-

selves on the land “demeans Indians. It makes them seem simply like an animal species, and thus deprives them of culture”, as fellow ethno-historian Richard White put it (Krech 1999, 26).¹

Now, did the 10 million people living in North America² before the arrival of the Europeans leave any lasting impact on their environment?—given their small numbers and their systemic understanding of their environment. Krech asked various sub-questions:

- Did Paleo-Indians cause the extinction of large mammals during the Pleistocene era by over-hunting them? Recalling geoscientist Paul S. Martin’s accusation (2005), Krech showed that he was unconvinced, whilst acknowledging that Paleo-Indians were not entirely free from responsibility.
- Did the ancient Hohokam destroy crops with growing salinity by building the largest canal system in Native North America? Krech concluded that each age reads different teachings into so-called historical facts, and that history reveals far more about the time when it was written than it does about the past.
- Did Native peoples over-hunt the buffalo, the deer and the beaver? Many nations believed that animals returned after death, and waste, as we understand it currently, was not a Native concept at that time. After contact, these animals continued to be sources of subsistence food and market commodities. Waste occurred, but of course mainly after the Euro-Americans hunted them industrially and put pressure on the American Indians to do it for them. Krech then showed that the Native Americans’ responsibility was more than matched by the Euro-Americans and climatic changes.

Thus, in contrast to European images of an untouched Eden, American nature was not primeval but cultural. In Krech’s view, by the time Europeans arrived American Indians had long since altered the landscape by burning woodland for hunting large animals, for aggression, communication, and travel. But fire was not totally under control and the American Indians did not conceptualize ecological consequences as we see them today. Eventually, both the bacteriological shock and the European invasion stopped the burning in the 19th century and soon trees grew back in significant numbers.

Against all odds, Krech’s conclusions, while introducing the idea of the hybridisation of nature and culture—as developed below—were far less radical

1. Krech pays tribute to several fellow historians whose writings are related to his: Richard White, William Cronon, Sam D. Gill, William M. Denevan, Karl. W. Butzer, and Calvin Martin—with whom he eventually disagreed.

2. Two to eighteen million according to several contemporary authors (Krech 1999:83; Thornton 1987:15-41).

than his questions. His point was that ancient Native peoples and contemporary US citizens obviously have separate conceptualisations of the environmental system. The Native Americans possessed a vast systemic knowledge of their environment; they were close to it as well as quite in tune with their spirituality. But their knowledge was not within the parameters of 20th century understanding. In Krech's view many contemporary Native peoples rely on an ecological imagery, mainly for the sake of identity and sovereignty in the context of political struggle. However, that imagery generally stems more from European self-criticism than from indigenous realities. Moreover, while emphasizing the epistemological and spiritual differences between Indians and non-Indians, making their valorization of nature different, even as both groups harnessed nature's assets for market purposes, US ethno-historian Sam Gill (1987) and French anthropologist Philippe Descola (2005; 2010; 2011) also argued that most Native Americans are not quite as familiar with the contemporary Western ecological discourse. It seems necessary for them to cling to it for identity reasons (2010, 74). This type of environmentalism sounds surprisingly instrumental. If recognized by several eminent scholars, should it be regarded as a process of indigenisation of modernity? Then, the history of Native Americans as ecologists and conservationists is more complex than the myth. "Does this make them less Indian?" Krech asks (Calloway 1). A 20th-century Choctaw answers: "Just because I don't want to be a white man doesn't mean I want to be some kind of mystical Indian either. Just a real human being" (Calloway 1).

The controversy

In the early 2000s, the controversy was fierce. It was fuelled by debates centred around three main stances:

- The political sensitivity of several Native American activists.
- The moderate stance among Native Americans and Euro-Americans.
- The scientific stance with critiques from Indian and non-Indian fellow US ethno-historians.

Accusing Krech of being 'politically incorrect' was well-known writer and historian Vine Deloria Jr. He charged Krech with writing a "revisionist" and "anti-Indian" essay distorting well-established facts: "The Indians did not make any appreciable dent in buffalo numbers in the Northern Plains. It's anti-Indian stuff." [Scholars such as Krech] "cook the facts to reach conclusions [cancelling out] what happened to this continent since the whites appeared" (cited by TallBear 2). Meanwhile, an *Indian Country Today* reviewer took Krech to task for using

twisted logic [to] absolve non-Indian commercial buffalo hunters from all guilt. [...] Krech concludes by painting a terrifying picture of how American Indians

continue to mismanage resources with terrifying results [...] raising the threat of ecological or worse yet, nuclear holocaust, this anthropologist tries to scare his readers into the conclusion that American Indians must be stopped from controlling their own resources at all costs (TallBear 3).

According to those extreme stances—actually Krech did not make any mention of nuclear holocaust in relation to Native peoples—two points were made: Krech was, on the one hand, criticized for apparently trying to play down the whites' responsibility in the major changes that occurred in America over the last five centuries; and on the other hand, chastised for stating that Indians have never been able to manage their own environment.

There were also more balanced and open approaches. Native author Kimberly TallBear (National Institute for Indigenous Resource Management) disagreed with Vine Deloria:

Krech does not try to 'cancel out' White atrocities. [...] I don't see that it is necessary to demonize Krech for challenging a stereotype that, while it may be healing to an extent, helps perpetuate divisive identity politics underway in Indian Country, and de-legitimizes the efforts of tribes to govern ourselves if we are not perceived as traditional according to a narrow, generic, and romanticized view of what is traditional (2).

Her conclusion could be summarized in her statement: "Krech's attempts to interpret and describe without a hint of moralizing and judgment the religious beliefs that were at the root of tribal practice is a reason to find this book pro-human and within that, pro-Indian" (2). This showed, if necessary, that all Native Americans did not share the same strategies to support their common objectives. The frontline, if there is any, has of course nothing to do with Turner's now out-dated theory of the Frontier.

A more scientific approach was supported by ethno-historians and anthropologists. Most of them did not condemn Krech for lacking respect towards Native Americans, but for being more polemical than scientific. They knew of Calvin Martin's theory (1978). Additional—less controversial—pioneers close to that hypothesis had been Rambo and Redford who had previously showed possible environmental damage by Native peoples (1991). Dean R. Snow (Pennsylvania State University Dpt. of Anthropology) definitely sided with Krech, expressing his own willingness to face the uncomfortable scientific truth:

The bottom line is that much of what modern Americans think they know about ecology and the American Indians is firmly rooted in shallow current ideology. Shepard Krech has challenged his readers to look beyond this comfortable but superficial and ultimately ephemeral understanding, and to deal honestly with

the contradictions they encounter in the intimate and unexpected relationships of plants, animals, and people in America (73).

Helen Dennis (University of Warwick) acknowledged the strong scientific background of Krech's research, but she expressed reserves about his oversimplification:

I can't help suspecting an un-interrogated because unconscious assumption that the norm for 'a human being' is that of Western, European or Euro-American man (sic); and that a central premise of Krech's argument is that Native Americans are far more like us whitemen (sic) than we have previously wanted to believe, because we whitemen (sic) have needed to idealize them. Perhaps the truth is even more complicated than even Krech's version of it (1).

Adrian Tanner (Dpt. of Anthropology of Memorial University of Newfoundland) was even more critical of the way several historical anachronisms in Krech's book may endanger the contemporary Native American cause:

Krech's view of Indians seems curiously old-fashioned, presenting them as poorly adapted, without practical knowledge of sustainable production, motivated instead by irrational beliefs" [...] Unfortunately, Krech's failure to adequately take account of the political context of Indian environmental discourse means his book may play into the hands of reactionary and racist interests and prejudices opposed to aboriginal rights (1).

Obviously, Krech was attacked more on the political and cultural impacts of his essay than on the topic of the environmental impact of the American Indians.

The most elaborate criticism came several years afterwards in Spring 2002 at the 10th annual symposium of the University of Wyoming American Heritage Center. The conference was dedicated to a debate on the impact of Krech's book and how it triggered emerging scientific scholarship. Most scholars were non-Indian. The symposium was admonished by several Native leaders, among them Vine Deloria Jr. arguing that scientific debates challenging the idea of the Ecological Indian—even if necessary for scientific reasons—undermined the Native self-image and de-legitimized Native communities as sovereign entities and responsible resource managers in the present. As Michael Harkin and David Rich Lewis remarked in a collection of essays bringing together the main papers of the 2002 Laramie Symposium, Krech's book had a "remarkable reception": remarkable for the penetration into the general media of an academic book, and remarkable for the strength of feeling associated with both positive and negative readings of it" (2007:xix). As Brian Hosmer phrased it "the public discourse [...] compels us to think twice about the concept of 'Indianness'" (Hosmer 2007, xiv). There is in the book a strong feeling of "*ethnographic irony*"

on the ideology of ecology, filling the gap between myth and history (2007:xxi). One of the most critical papers was authored by Darren J. Ranco, Penobscot, (Dpt. of Native American Studies at Dartmouth College), who argued that Krech's points reveal his neo-colonialism (2007:32-51). In Ranco's view, Krech's hypotheses—whatever their scientific value—were invalidated because they undermined Native Americans' identity and political struggle for self determination and equality—Ranco being that way quite close to Deloria's stance. Harvey A. Feit (Dpt. of anthropology at McMaster University) argued that Krech's representations of the Native peoples, while legitimate, eventually oversimplify them (2007:52-92). In the same collection of essays, Krech responded to those attacks by standing firm (2007:3-31, 343-53).

Over the years, we cannot but notice that Krech's stimulation has triggered powerful and straightforward research programs³. A new generation of ethno-historians and anthropologists is now coming of age, and revisionism in the history of the West is no longer taboo, as demonstrated by the New Western History over the last 30 years. Another example of some hybridisation of points and concepts

Krech's methodological heritage and background: the hybridisation of methodologies and concepts

Before and beyond the environmental debate, Krech's critique is fuelled by wider debates in relation to the sociological and anthropological fields. Over the last 30 years, one of the main discoveries of human and social science is

3. Cf. Borgerhoff Mulder M, Coppolillo P. 2005. *Conservation: Ecology, Economics, and Culture*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press; Deloria V. 2000. The speculations of Krech. *Worldviews* 4:283–93; Holt F. 2005. The catch-22 of conservation: indigenous peoples, biologists, and cultural change. *Hum. Ecol.* 33:199–215; Krech S. 2005. Reflections on conservation, sustainability, and environmentalism in indigenous North America. *Am. Anthropol.* 107:78–86; Krech S. 2007a. Afterword. In *Native Americans and the Environment: Perspectives on the Ecological Indian*, ed. M Harkin, Dr Lewis, pp. 343–54. Lincoln, NE: Univ. Nebraska Press; Krech S. 2007b. Beyond the Ecological Indian. In *Perspectives on the Ecological Indian: Native Americans and the Environment*, ed. M Harkin, DR Lewis, pp. 3–31. Lincoln: Univ. Neb.Press; LeBlanc S. 2003. *Constant Battles: The Myth of the Peaceful, Noble Savage*. New York: St. Martin's Press; Nadasdy P. 2005. Transcending the debate over the ecologically noble Indian: indigenous peoples and environmentalism. *Ethnohistory* 52:291–331; Smith N. 2001. Are indigenous peoples conservationists? *Rational. Soc.* 13:229–61; Stoffle R. 2005. Places that count: traditional cultural properties in cultural resource management; tribal cultural resource management: the full circle to stewardship. *Am. Anthropol.* 107:138–40.

that their separate domains can now overlap and even merge—ethno-history, paleo-anthropology and all neurosciences being examples. Basic concepts can be subjected to hybridisation, eventually challenging the traditional distinction between culture and nature. It is a major step in the long history of the development of humanities. Moreover, the last 30 years have showed that science can gradually eliminate the long-standing so-called Western superiority and is now triggering the discovery of the universality of mankind. In the wake of anti-colonialism and post-structuralism, cultural studies of the 1980s & 90s argued that nature was a phantasm of Western social domination. In the same way, environmentalism was criticized as a romantic ideology. Ethno-historian William Cronon demonstrated that wilderness, “a dualistic vision in which the human is entirely outside the natural”, as we traditionally imagine it, has no relation to nature (1996:7-55). In the Western world traditions, nature is a hunting area, a field for experimentation and research for Man. By standing back from nature, Europeans invented it. It gradually built the unilinear evolutionism—typical of the 19th century and the colonial era—the idea of human progress as the step-by-step domination of the body by the soul. Through three consecutive Western traditional eras—the Savage, the Barbarian, and the civilized man—the Europeans ruled their relationships with the rest of the world until the mid-20th century. Every human being would have then to go through the same sequence of development.

At the same time, we could observe a redemptive cultural critique using other societies as an alibi for redressing what was troubling the Western world since the 18th century. It was in protest against the official colonial vision paving the way for contemporary post-colonial guilt. Either with the Good Savage, mirroring the Western world from La Hontan’s Adario to Voltaire’s Huron, reflecting candidly our faults, or with the wise Indian—related to the more recent romantic Ecological Indian—ancestral experience is supposed to show us the way to respond to racism, sexism, imperialism, etc., according to their own exotic cultural lights.

Hybridisation of science

Tristes Tropiques was a major step in the anti-imperialistic literature, through which French anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss questioned the so-called superiority of Western cosmology. In *The Savage Mind* he suggested the disappearance of all hierarchies among cultures. He compelled his fellow anthropologists to question their own writing and methodologies, as well as their relationships with their so-called objects/subjects of their study. Levi-Strauss endorsed a new anthropology merging various human sciences, decolonized and free from ethnocentrism. He showed that Native peoples interact among

themselves and with nature in a cluster of relationships including what we call humans and non-humans, which are seen differently by them. Native science is built with these hybrids.

French sociologist and philosopher Bruno Latour was soon to demonstrate that the world is made of hybrid objects, partly of science, politics, culture and economy, mixtures between entirely new types of beings, nature-culture hybrids (1991). Science is nothing but ideology; nature does not have its own rules, and society is not run by very different principles. Latour's "principle of symmetry" argues that both nature and society cannot be used to explain things, but have to be explained through networks. The same language can be used to explain human and non-human activities. A road ahead for anthropology.

As we will see further on, US anthropologist Marshall Sahlins also worked on the hybridisation of concepts. He was an advocate of ethno-history, an ethnography including time and transformation with a possibility of changing the way culture is considered.

Hybridisation within science, a redefinition of anthropology

Brazilian anthropologist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, the father of perspectivism, also called for a profound renewal of anthropology: "if anthropology 'is' a science of something, it is undoubtedly the comparative science of the relations that make us human" (2003). Anthropology should not have a doctrine on the nature of social relations. It should place "in relationship different problems, not a single ('natural') problem and its different ('cultural') solutions. Thus the 'art of anthropology' is [...] the art of determining the problems posed by each culture, not the art of finding solutions to those problems posed by our own" (2003, 3).

If anthropology "begins by asserting the de jure equivalence between the discourses of anthropologist and Native", it also has to reflect "a certain relation of intelligibility between the two cultures" (2003, 3). Viveiros de Castro suggested rethinking the notion of practice: "pure practice exists only in theory; in practice, it always comes heavily mixed with theory" (2003). Through "mind decolonization" (2009, 4), indigenous societies also invent the anthropologist's understanding. The Native peoples are active and creative partners and Native societies are built in the mind of the anthropological analyst.

To illustrate this interaction, Viveiros de Castro reported a highly significant anecdote related by Levi-Strauss in both *Race and History* and *Tristes Tropiques*. In the early 16th century, the Native Americans thought the Europeans were gods while most Europeans barely conceived of the indigenous peoples as men. Whereas the Spaniards were trying to establish if the American Indians had some sort of soul—the Valladolid Controversy—the Indians were questioning

the nature of the bodies of the Europeans. A discovery reported in the West Indies that Native Americans would examine the decomposition of the dead bodies of Spaniards submerged in water. That confrontation of two epistemologies, of two ways of constructing knowledge shows that every single community develops proper intellectual tools and practices in order to know who they are and who the others are, without the help of ethnology.

Viveiros de Castro stated that anthropology now had to take Native science into account within our own. He recalled that every animal is a man inside the skin of an animal. Under the skin, whatever it is, we all have the same interiority, and he demonstrated that the construction of the subjective identity occurs through the absorption of external points of view, a transformation of cannibalism around which institutions develop. This is the way shamanism functions, through cannibalisation; the shaman being the one who experiments several points of view: human, jaguar, foe or god (2009:129). Shamanism, kinship, politics are various ways of activating more general schemes of the perception of oneself and of the world. Perspectivism then shows us the interconnections and the integration of various institutions that our anthropology traditionally differentiates and separates. Viveiros de Castro invited the anthropologists to examine “the conditions in which the ontological determination operates within the studied communities” (2009:7).

The objective is then the project of some hybrid combination of that “*cannibalistic cogito*” with our concept of subjectivity, the Native American concept of a “*person*” and our individualism, their cosmologies and our philosophies. Considering the savage mind, it was about time for us to redefine our contemporary mind, with more flexibility and variety.

Hybridisation of nature and culture? “Culture is the human nature” (Sahlins 2008: 104)

Hybridisation of nature and culture is the next step. Recently, Sahlins assembled all the theories, and asserted that these so-called non-human beings are also men. Quoting Viveiros de Castro, he acknowledged that the voice of a bird in the forest can be interpreted by Indians as the voice of a child: “having been human, animals must still be human, albeit in a non-evident way” (2008:96). He also quoted Canadian anthropologist Robin Ridington on British Columbia peoples: “human people are constantly in contact with the non-human persons” [in] “an interpersonal dialogue among people”. Hunting as an example is “integral to the social process of social life” (Sahlins 2008, 92). He explained: “the positive point is that plants and animals of significance to the people, as also features of the landscape, celestial bodies, meteorological phenomena, even certain artefacts, are beings like themselves: persons with the attributes

of humanity and sometimes the appearance thereof, as in dreams and visions” (2008:88). All the surrounding elements are kinsmen: the Ojibway ontology—described by Irving Hallowell (1960)—includes the whole environment in the category of “person” (Sahlins 2008, 91). Communication “is achieved through dreams, myths, spells, incantations, shamanic transformations and their like” (2008:96).

How can the process be explained? US anthropologist Clifford Geertz summarized an explanation:

“Humans evolved biologically under cultural selection. We have been fashioned body and soul for cultural existence”; “Human nature is a becoming [...] rather than an always-ready being”; “Born neither good nor bad; human beings make themselves in social activity as it unfolds in given historical circumstances” (Sahlins 2008, 96).

All these conclusions were also echoed by Philippe Descola. In the wake of Latour’s works—even if they disagree on various topics (2011:96), he stated that most objects in our environment, including ourselves, are both natural and cultural. In America, the humanity of these objects—stemming from their idea of themselves—is moral: it is not a physical humanity. The various elements of nature “do not exist in the same ontological niche defined by its lack of humanity” (2005, translated by Sahlins 2008, 88). In Descola’s view, the idea of nature took shape only between the Western 17th and 19th centuries in Germany in contrast to the universal vision of the French Enlightenment. It was later exported to the US by one of the founding fathers of US anthropology, Franz Boas (2005). On the one hand, there is a natural world and, on the other hand, there is a variety of cultural worlds which adapt to the natural environment. This component of US culturalism is now widely accepted by most Western populations. But that distribution is far from being universal, while the distinction between body and soul seems to be widely accepted throughout the world. Interiority provides consciousness to the person, and it can be detected among non-humans. Physicality is the biological and material dimension of humans and non-humans. In that view, nature is at the root of “naturalistic” cosmology and we cannot simply apply our cosmology to the rest of the world. For Native Americans, animals, plants and several other non-animated beings harbour some “*spirit*”, feelings, languages, morals, and eventually a culture, which is not essentially different from human culture⁴. Are there societies everywhere? We now have to change our way of explaining the world.

4. Similarly, hybrid knowledge systems are being negotiated by contemporary Native peoples with non-Indian scientists, policy-makers, and legislators across boundaries that reflect different kinds of knowledge.

Over the last 20 years we have found echoes of that sensitivity in the New Western History. Patricia Nelson Limerick, William Cronon and Richard White, among its main founders, called for some hybridisation of various historical approaches: listening to the voices of not only conquerors, not only their victims, but also a variety of players in and witnesses to events, considering a variety of possible confrontations and collaborations between contact groups—the Middle Ground (White 1999). These practices have opened the gate to the numerous historical schools which have come to life in the last two decades: cultural studies, subaltern studies, postcolonial studies, genre studies, etc., and currently global history. Historians and ethnologists have generated ethno-historians now contributing to a global anthropology, which is today at work on an anthropology of globalisation.

Conclusion

Thus, beyond the slow merging of Native traditional environmentalism and white contemporary environmentalism into a hybrid global environmentalism, we understand that current processes of hybridisation are now at work in every field. They currently occur in non-Indian science as we saw. They also occur in the Indian mind and science and in the complementarity of Indian and non-Indian scientific approaches for the future. The hybridisation at work in US ethno-history, merging confrontation into combinations has revealed mutual influences among social groups at multiple levels. Sometimes things happen in an unexpected way: when some modernisation of indigenous life is generally expected, it sometimes gives way to an indigenisation of modernity (Sahlins 2000). If Krech's essay triggered popular reflection on the place of Native Americans in nature, it also resulted from an earlier and wider scientific revolution. It was the visible tip of the iceberg showing that scientific studies should always be ready for revisionism for the sake of science.

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Résumé : En France comme aux Etats-Unis, les historiens se sont parfois montrés sévères à l’égard de l’ouvrage de Shepard Krech III *The Ecological Indian: Myth and History* (1999). Aussi inattendue que soit sa prise de position pour un public non averti, cette thèse est loin d’être novatrice parmi les scientifiques. Cet article tente de retracer son cheminement. Mashall Sahlins, Bruno Latour, Philippe Descola et Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, qui forment aujourd’hui un groupe de réflexion informel et extrêmement fécond avec des points de convergence essentiels et des désaccords considérables, n’ont cessé de s’inspirer mutuellement au cours des trois dernières décennies tout en rendant des hommages contrastés à l’œuvre fondatrice de Claude Lévi-Strauss. Leurs constats et propositions sur l’hybridation des diverses approches scientifiques, sur l’évolution nécessaire des méthodes sociologiques et anthropologiques ont fait florès, ainsi que le coup de force conceptuel qui leur est commun : la reconnaissance de la permanence des ontologies indigènes locales et la rupture de la démarcation récente et étroitement localisée à l’Occident entre nature et culture. Ainsi la réflexion des anthropologues, des sociologues et des historiens actuels nous invite non seulement à repenser la place des indigènes de l’Amérique dans la nature, mais également la place de la nature dans l’homme.

Mots-clés : Anthropologie, Culture, Environnementalisme, Ethnohistoire, Objets hybrides, Indigénisation de la modernité, Amérindiens, Nature.

Summary: In both France and in the United States, historians have proven to be somewhat critical of the essay *The Ecological Indian: Myth and History* by Shepard Krech III (1999). Unexpectedly for the profane reader, Krech's hypotheses were far from being disturbing to every scientist. This paper will comment on the development of these theories. Marshall Sahlins, Clifford Geertz, Bruno Latour, Philippe Descola and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, among others, have now formed an informal, but extremely fruitful, think tank with several key points of agreement as well as some noticeable differences of opinion in their global theories on anthropology and its methods. They have deeply inspired each other over the last three decades while paying contrasted tributes to founding father Levi-Strauss. Their common understanding of the hybridisation of various scientific approaches and of the necessary development of sociological and anthropological methods has been remarkably successful. Equally in vogue has been their conceptual coup: recognition of the enduring local indigenous ontologies and of the disappearance of the recent, but deeply Western, demarcation between the concepts of nature and culture. These conclusions lead us to reconsider not only our understanding of the place of the natives in nature, but also the place of nature in mankind.

Keywords: Anthropology, Culture, Environmentalism, Ethno-history, Hybridization, Indigenization of Modernity, Native Americans, Nature.