



INDIGENOUS TERRITORIAL AUTONOMY AND SELF-GOVERNMENT IN THE DIVERSE AMERICAS

Edited by Miguel González, Ritsuko Funaki, Araceli Burguete Cal y Mayor, José Marimán, and Pablo Ortiz-T

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Mapuche Autonomy in *Pwelmapu*:¹ Confrontation and/or Political Construction?

Verónica Azpiroz Cleñan

Introduction

Prior to the existence of nation-states in the Americas, the Mapuche were one of the great pre-existing societies in the region. Their territory stretched across the southern part of the continent from the Pacific to the Atlantic Ocean, an area covering a large part of what are now the nation-states of Argentina and Chile. Two great territorial identities, the land to the west and that to the east of the Andes Mountains, functioned as a single territory known as *Wallmapu*, with two major divisions known as *Fütal Mapu: Gulumapu* and *Pwelmapu* (Nagüil, 2010).

The most significant consequence of the Argentine army's invasion of Mapuche territory (1876-78) following independence from Spain, together with similar action from Chile (1860-81) on the western side of the Andes, was a genocide of the people (Lenton, 1999). It changed the way of life of those who survived this war of conquest, involuntarily incorporating them into the nation-state without collective rights as a political society (Azpiroz Cleñan, 2013), and putting their material and cultural reproduction at risk in both regions (Bustos, 2012).

This disruption of Mapuche society in the 19th century resulted in a loss of political community, i.e., of political self-determination and territorial sovereignty for Mapuche national society. It also resulted in the alienation of Mapuche citizens, both from their politically devastated society and from Argentine national society, which treated and continues to treat them as second-class citizens.

Years have passed and the older generations of Mapuche, knocked down and depressed by those events, are now beginning to take steps, hand-in-hand with the younger generations, to talk about and reinterpret history, with a consequent rebirth of Mapuche national identity. The purpose of this paper is to analyze contemporary Mapuche micro-experiences that discursively take up the narrative of Mapuche autonomy but which are macro-politically uncoordinated in terms of Mapuche ethno-nationalism in *Pwelmapu*.

The question guiding this analysis is: is there a desire within the Mapuche narrative to push the boundaries of procedural democracy² and work to reform the (neo-)colonial State into a plurinational one? This paper also endeavors to ascertain whether Mapuche autonomy could give rise, in a federal but not an ethno-federal Argentine State, to the recognition of the political rights of the Mapuche nation in the form of self-government?

My assumption regarding these issues is that the autonomist narrative has symbiotic overtones with Mapuche experiences in *Gulumapu* (Mapuche territory in Chile). In Chile, the Mapuche have been demanding autonomy in the form of self-government for three decades now. During the course of this article, we shall see whether the information I offer herein confirms my intuition or demonstrates that we are building a path to autonomy that is totally different and unconnected with these experiences.

The text is structured as follows: I will first analyze Argentinians' perceptions of the Mapuche and the autonomist ideas that Mapuche organizations have set out in three provinces: Chubut, Río Negro and Neuquén. I will then consider how the Mapuche view themselves, how they are "re-ethnifying" and creating/adopting new ethno-nationalist ideas. I will go on to look at the reaction of the national government under the Macri administration to the politicized Mapuche "otherness," and I will end with a personal reflection on the most viable political project for building autonomy à la *Pwelche*.³

The “other” as perceived by Argentinians: Reactions to Mapuche discourse on autonomy

The re-ethnification of the Mapuche in *Pwelmapu*, after decades of concealing their pre-existing cultural identities, commenced in 1992 at a time when the Catholic Church in the Americas together with colonial “spokespersons”⁴ were trying to construct the narrative of an “encounter between two cultures” to refer to the five-hundredth anniversary of the Spanish Conquest, thus euphemistically erasing the Mapuche genocide. The new Mapuche leaders in Neuquén and Río Negro embarked on a tour of seven Argentine provinces with Mapuche populations and communities to gain support for the idea of a Mapuche political flag. This tour, conceived by Miguel Leuman,⁵ revolved around the concept of a political symbol of the people’s unity throughout *Wallmapu*. There was sufficient political resonance to challenge the King of Spain, who visited Argentina to celebrate the Conquest. The *wenu foye* (flag of the Mapuches) became the political banner of the whole of *Wallmapu*. This process should be seen as a symbolic re-territorialization of the Mapuche in political terms.

Since that time, a process of “re-Mapuchization” of their identity has been developing, although this has advanced only tentatively toward demanding autonomy and political rights because it initially took the form of a cultural revival. Insofar as this revival crossed the fluid boundaries of culture (understood as distinct from the political or apolitical) to assume that cultural rights would continue to be at risk without political empowerment, autonomist ideas did begin to make some headway. This was unlike the experiences that were developing in *Gulumapu*, however.

There are several elements that distinguish the discourse on autonomy in *Pwelmapu* (Argentina) from that of *Gulumapu* (Chile). First, the development of the welfare state with a focus on Peronism. Second, the presence of the Catholic Church, with an emphasis on the Salesians. Third, the configuration of an internal enemy within neoliberal multiculturalism. Fourth, access to free university education, and the social mobilization that has been growing since the mid-20th century, along with the alliances between the Mapuche movement and human rights organizations. Fifth, the geographical extent of *Pwelmapu*, with a presence in seven federal states (provinces). And, sixth, the media, which has constructed a Mapuche stereotype that ranges from the folkloric to the terrorist/Kurdish/Iranian Mapuche.

And yet, Mapuche political ideas on autonomy in *Pwelmapu* are also influenced by the different political realities between the two States and their political societies (as already demonstrated in the previous paragraph, and to which can be added the fact that Argentina's system of representation is federal, with three levels of State administration – national, provincial and municipal – superimposed).⁶ A quick look at the situation of the Mapuche in *Pwelmapu* shows us that, in socioeconomic terms, their population suffers from economic impoverishment and wage dependency (especially at the provincial level) given that 45% of State employees are of Mapuche origin in Neuquén and 33% in Río Negro (Census, 2010 – author's compilation). This indicates dependency, and a system of political capture by the State's network of social policies that inhibits autonomous political action, alongside poor political mobilization by the Mapuche organizations. (This phenomenon is even more pronounced in the provinces of Chubut, Mendoza, Buenos Aires and La Pampa.) Furthermore, while we recognize that we form part of a bi-national community of people (in both Argentina and Chile), macro-political coordination and the transfer of political experiences between either side is still in its infancy.

The construction of the Mapuche “other” as another subject of Argentine citizenship (Azpiroz Cleñan, 2017) and as a political subject with collective rights has followed a certain course in Argentina. The media, largely national-run monopolies,⁷ hold important sway in the provinces since these latter are largely dependent on a single newsprint supplier, particularly in Río Negro.⁸ Until 2017, the stylization of the Mapuche in the media focused on the folkloric or the “permitted Indian,” but from that year on, the “insurrectionist Indian” could also be seen. Authors such as Richards (2009) and Cusicanqui (2004) define this category as follows:

The “permitted Indian”, then, is one who is approved and validated by the government, who accepts without question the policies of the State that is promoting them and who does not demand more but accepts this. (Richards, 2009, n/p)

...With the permitted Indian comes, inevitably, the construction of his undeserving, dysfunctional “other”, two very different ways of being Indian. The permitted Indian has passed the test of modernity, replaced “protest” with “proposal” and learned to be

authentic and fully familiar with the dominant landscape. His “other” is rebellious, vengeful and prone to conflict. These latter traits worry elites who have pledged allegiance to cultural equality, sowing fears about what the empowerment of these “other” Indians might portend. (Hale, 2007 n/p)

This media portrayal broke down during the judicial case over the disappearance and death of Santiago Maldonado in 2017. Mauricio Macri’s national government (2015-19) scaled up its xenophobic discourse against the Mapuche,⁹ migrants and Afro-descendants. The media, grouped around Clarín,¹⁰ began painting the Mapuche as violent and combative, and began to smear them by suggesting links to the Kurds, Iran, or the Colombian Revolutionary Armed Forces (FARC).

The world of politics picked up this discourse and allowed itself to be influenced by it, recreating it in its own way. The following are comments made by the *Juntos Somos Río Negro* (Together We are Río Negro) political party as regards the Mapuche construction process and its demands:

The problem that arises with recognition of collective rights is that it encourages political attempts on the part of groups which, for various reasons, are challenging our current political and social organization. Every group that aspires to a new identity resorts to historical or mythical narratives to legitimize its political aspirations. These are myths that contain a certain historical truth, but they are intertwined with pragmatic interests that pursue other objectives. Identities are achieved by opposition, by pointing out an enemy. And, to make room for these, on occasion they resort to violent tactics or pave the way for the birth of more radical groups.¹¹

They can be seen to be reacting to the Mapuche and their demands as follows: 1) as if they were a “problem” or perhaps a threat to the democratic system; 2) as if they were making demands without any real support and with unknown, perhaps sinister, nefarious, or frightening, intent; 3) as sowers of Argentine nationalistic (chauvinistic) division; and 4) as paving the way for potential racial ethnic violence or political violence in the style of 1970s Cold War Latin America.¹²

Another, more ethno-paternalistic, aspect paints the Mapuche and their demands in a softer way, as can be seen in these lines from the provincial newspaper *Río Negro*, which is the voice of the provincial government:

The State of Río Negro has incorporated the issue of Indigenous Peoples as government policy, through the Advisory Council of Indigenous Communities (CoDeCi). At the request of the Mapuche people themselves, bilingual education — including their native language — has been included in Chacay Huarruca school in the provincial foothills near former Route 40.¹³

This narrative illustrates the concessions granted by the province to a political subject as distinct from the “Argentinity” that arrived off the boats.¹⁴ There is no mention, however, of actions claiming political or territorial rights, as crystallized in the land disputes in that province. The situation is similar for Mapuche groups in the city of Bariloche, who position themselves in relation to the provincial State as Argentine citizens with specific and collective rights, albeit not of a political but a cultural nature. See the following opinion, for example:

In Neuquén, Mapuche mechanisms for justice administration have been introduced, in some cases on an equal footing with the provincial judiciary. The organization to which I belong (*Espacio de Articulación Mapuche*) succeeded in getting the municipality of Bariloche recognized as intercultural, but we are still struggling for the intercultural public policies implied in that recognition to become reality. To put an end to this conflict, formulas are needed that will allow the Mapuche to recover their autonomy and exercise their self-determination. (Moyano, 2017)¹⁵

This Mapuche organization takes a discursive approach toward autonomy and self-determination, choosing interaction with the provincial State as the path for its political practice under the notion of “interculturality” (Walsh, 2008). This is without considering, however, that interculturality is a concept constructed and validated by the Washington Consensus and operationalized by the international financial institutions (WB, IDB, IBRD, etc.). It has certainly been successful in Argentina because it hides the asymmetry of

economic and political power between Indigenous peoples and the dominant society. The concept is useful and functional to the State's mechanisms for maintaining private property and a concentration of land. State plans and programs use the concept of interculturality most often to disguise assimilationist policies.

Ordinance No. 2641-CM-15 proposed by the *Espacio de Articulación Política Mapuche* (Space for Mapuche Political Coordination) collective in 2017 with the purpose of seeing intercultural policies flourish, expresses that vision. This ordinance remained in limbo for a while owing to the lack of regulations. It was allocated only a minimal budget in 2016, less than USD 10,000 per year to be applied in twelve rural communities around the city of Bariloche. They had to settle for the implementation of training workshops for municipal officials and employees, which took place in the months prior to the ordinance's approval by the deliberative council of the city of San Carlos de Bariloche. No concrete progress has been made since the approval of the ordinance and the declaration of Bariloche as an intercultural municipality. No programs, policies, or plans have emerged to demonstrate any progress in turning the municipality into an intercultural Argentine institution.¹⁶ In addition, under Macri's administration, Bariloche was the scene of the murder of Rafael Nahuel, a young Mapuche man, during an attempted territorial recovery.

In sum, all three media narratives illustrated so far paint the Mapuche in a monumentally different way: violent, institutionalized and intercultural. This last category — interculturality — arises in an urban setting that is surrounded by monuments depicting the defeat of the Mapuche people. The monument to Roca in the city's civic centre is an iconic representation of the genocidal triumph (Perez, 2011) that founded Argentina and would hardly seem to represent interculturality.

The diverse Mapuche “we” in the autonomist discourse-demand

There is Mapuche diversity and heterogeneity in *Pwelmapu*. The experience in terms of their autonomous political demands has been different in Neuquén Province, where organizational processes were linked to alliances with trade union sectors and part of the Catholic Church. The Mapuche Confederation of Neuquén emerged in the 1970s and worked to create

alliances with trade union sectors from the 1980s onwards,¹⁷ especially with the State Workers Association (ATE) and with the wage demands of the National Parks Administration — particularly Lanín National Park — in addition to human rights organizations. They injected strength and self-esteem into the mobilizations and demands made of the State by the province's different communities.¹⁸ And, in the public space, the mobilized unions were able to form a significant and unified mass of people in clashes with the security forces that were sometimes planned, sometimes spontaneous. At key moments of political dispute, whether symbolic or legal, the alliance: unions, human rights organizations and “Confe” (a nickname used by the people for the Confederation) have been able to act as a sociocultural/union bloc.

The result of all this is that Neuquén's political authorities have historically responded to the Mapuche people's demands with social policies, generating clientelist relationships and strategic co-optation, ignoring demands made as political subjects distinct from Argentine society (Falaschi et al., 2005). In other words, they have accepted the Mapuche people's claims of being a “poor” sector of the Argentine population but do not recognize demands related to their cultural, environmental and political rights as a pre-existing nation. This did change somewhat in 2006, however, through reforms made to the Provincial Constitution that recognized the Mapuche identity in the terms of how people themselves understood it, assigning a name and surname to newborns. This institutional policy was known as *Meli folil kvpan*, the four origins of the person, embodied in the Civil Registry of the Province.

From 2010 on, Confe splintered and separated, resulting in a dispersion of both the political leadership and any cohesive common strategy in relation to the nation-state and oil companies. In the Confluencia area (the area surrounding the capital city of Neuquén, which was Confe's heartland), Jorge Nahuel (spokesperson), whose rhetoric used to be opposed to the Argentine State, began to dissociate himself from his historical position during the Macri period. He declared in public statements that:

There has never [been] such an important loss of Argentine national sovereignty and I refer to this aspect because our [Mapuche] flag of free determination as a pre-existing people is conditional upon being able to conduct a process of negotiation with a free and autonomous government in relation to the subjugation of the great empires.¹⁹

Several conceptual observations should be noted in Nahuel's account. On the one hand, it uses the term "*libre determinación*" ("free determination"), a concept not used by Mapuche leaders in *Pwelmapu*. In Argentina, the term "*auto-determinación*" ("self-determination") is used to differentiate this from the claim of the "Kelpers" in the Malvinas (Falkland) Islands, who are calling for *libre determinación*. He then mentions another concept strictly linked to recognition of the State's power, which is "sovereignty", and refers to a sense of Argentine national identity. The contradiction in Nahuel is that while he considers himself to be a non-Argentine Mapuche, his words demonstrate his alignment with Argentine national autonomy. A Mapuche autonomist would see the weakness of its main oppressor (the Argentine State) as an opportunity to break away from the "republic" and form an autonomous Mapuche territory. This is the territorialist vision of autonomy "the Mapuche way," according to Nagüil (2020).

Reading the public documents issued by Confe (2017), which is no longer what it once was in the 1970s but rather a group of leaders from the Confluencia area, it is possible to note a change in the use of some concepts. The organization has publicly maintained precise language with which to oppose an invasive, imperative "otherness" such as the Argentine institutional structure. This means that, despite the intention to establish a rhetoric of autonomy (Millaman, 2001) in various governmental situations (at times of great roll-back of social, political and cultural rights), a language that is symbiotic with Argentine nationalism has emerged. It is important to distinguish between Argentine citizenship and nationhood. It is correct and desirable to retain the legal status of an Argentine citizen who is also a member of the Mapuche nation. However, this does not emerge clearly from Confe's discourse nor in the narrative of the organizations of Río Negro (Río Negro Parliament).

This observation is important for an intra-Mapuche political strategy. Since the Mapuche nation forms a political minority among Argentine citizens, alliances are needed with political parties in order to advance proposals that include Argentine sectors suffering the same or similar problems as the Mapuche nation rather than leaving Argentine "nationals" outside *Pwelmapu*. If such equating of autonomy with plurinationality is political, then political strength is needed to advance Mapuche — and other — political demands while being a minority.

To work effectively in these alliances from the sovereign perspective of a subjugated nation-peoples rather than ending up submerged within them, however, requires clarity as regards the distinction between citizens and nation. One is a citizen with respect to a State, but a State does not embody a nation. The language of the Argentine State was not born *in situ* but was instead appropriated from Spain, along with a spirituality brought by the Catholic Church; nor does the Argentine State have its own phenotypic and genotypic traits. It has a colonial language (Spanish), a Judeo-Christian religion or philosophy, and a Creole mix that has not yet acquired a genetic make-up of its own, being biological. It does not therefore constitute a nation. What the State does constitute is a political community with a republican form for the distribution of State functions and a democratic system for gaining access to the exercise of State power. In the words of José Marimán (2012), it can be observed that there are the different ethnic conditions in place to support the existence of a Mapuche nation but not an Argentine one. What exists is an Argentine State that encompasses multiple pre-existing nations not recognized as modern States.

Confe's discourse regarding Mapuche political participation in party politics also includes the following:

In Neuquén, they are attentive to certain siren songs that have begun to sound in Argentina, including in Río Negro. There is a myth that says that the way in which the Mapuche people should participate is by having a seat in the legislature or the right to participate in electoral spaces. It seems to us that this is a very dangerous tool because, where it has been applied, whether in Colombia or Ecuador, it was in no way a recognition of rights but rather a new mechanism to divide Indigenous Peoples and pit them against each other behind a particular candidate or electoral space. This is not the way to recognize plurinationality.

This quote seems to contradict what has been said previously about the Mapuche being "tied" to the Argentine national environment. Nahuel dissociates himself from citizenship obligations by means of neoliberal multiculturalism. So, in his view, what should the path to plurinationality be? Should we rely on statements from the Macri government or on those mentioned above regarding the Argentine-Mapuche link? In the rhetoric of the

timid Confe, there is some discursive confusion. They like a “Russian salad” kind of mix. They propose plurinationality as a value but do not say how to achieve it. And once plurinationality has been achieved as a quality of the State, would this be a step in the transition toward Mapuche autonomy? Much of the Mapuche leadership is built on opposition to the Argentine majority society’ but there is no internal political debate within the Mapuche movement to clarify whether they will follow a communitarian or a territorialist path for the reconstruction of *Pwelmapu* and *Gulumapu*. It would be sensible to have this.

The two paths for the reconstruction of *Wallmapu* were explained by Nagüil (2020) in a number of virtual public appearances in the run-up to Chile’s referendum to approve (or not) a new Constitution (25 October 2020) but the analysis clearly fits *Pwelmapu*. In brief, and so that the reader has a better understanding, these can be summarized as follows: a) territorialist autonomy sees *Wallmapu* as a defined space (Araucanía Region) in which the Mapuche nation is a demographic and political minority but they have a Mapuche project (for Mapuche and non-Mapuche) established for that space; in Chile, this would require the decentralization of the State; b) communitarian autonomy conceives the political rights of the Mapuche nation as being within a plurinational State (Chile and Argentina) with diverse and dispersed territorial rights and therefore without the possibility of self-government.

An emerging young Mapuche man in Chubut Province, Facundo Jones Huala,²⁰ who has been travelling the various Mapuche historical territories in search of the promised land (and who gained his most significant media prominence during the judicial case on the disappearance of Santiago Maldonado), has said with regard to the links between Mapuche organizations and trade unionism (surely with Confe’s experience in mind):

There has been great State interventionism in this regard, much co-optation and bureaucracy, very similar to the process in many unions. This has been especially as regards some of the leaders that emerged in the 1990s and part of the 1980s. The problem with these organizations is that they do not have an in-depth political analysis of the idea of autonomy, territory and national liberation.²¹ (*El Desconcierto*, 2016)

Other organizations from outlying areas of Bariloche city in Río Negro Province, located in rural and peri-urban communities, generally coordinate some of their actions at critical moments of confrontation with State security forces,²² in times of climate crisis,²³ as well as in the face of natural disasters that threaten their survival or in contexts of racist violence.²⁴ These communities are: Millalongo, Xipay Ahtü, Maliqueo, Wiritray, Tacul, Wenu nirihaü, Wala, Tambo Baez, Lafkenche, Calfunao, Buenuleo, Quijada and Rankewe.

In Río Negro, recognition of the existence of the Mapuche people as such took place during the two presidencies of Perón (1950-1955), with several decrees/laws governing the cession of lands. This process of provincialization occurred, according to Ruffini (2005), because the national territories were highly dependent on the central authorities (Buenos Aires) and the national territorial authorities in northern Patagonia had no functional or budgetary autonomy. They had limited political rights but these were not in line with Argentina's republican and federal system. Within this wider political framework, Perón's government gave special consideration to the "Indigenous reserves" and recognized them as such. In other words, there was a pragmatic/instrumental purpose in this early recognition.

In 1973, after several military coups and the proscription of Peronism, a new Peronist government took office and recognized eleven Indigenous reserves in the province of Río Negro. Until that moment, tutelary republicanism (during the transition from 1966 to 1973 when the armed forces "supervised" democracy under the governments of Onganía and Lanusse) had given rise to the existence of different Mapuche and non-Mapuche citizenships since the cultural and political rights of the Mapuche population were legally and *de facto* restricted.

In 1984, some Mapuche communities were organized as agricultural-livestock cooperatives and, together with the Bishopric of Viedma led by Monsignor Hesayne, began an organizational process to demand assistance from the State following a severe snowfall in which almost all herds of sheep, the only means of support for rural families, had been lost. The campaign, "A sheep for my brother," organized by this bishopric generated great social awareness of the needs of the Mapuche communities in terms of their economy but also of their right to pursue their livelihoods in their rural habitat.

This awareness set the conditions for a large mobilization around Mapuche demands in 1986/87, which resulted in the enactment of a Comprehensive Law on Indigenous Peoples (No. 2287). Ten years passed, however, without this law

(which proposed government and Indigenous community co-management in matters within their competence) being regulated or enforced. During all that time – even though there were no implementing regulations for the law – the communities met in the Indigenous Advisory Council (CAI), based in Jacobacci. Mapuche centres became established in the province’s largest cities, such as Bariloche, Viedma and Fiske Menuko (Gral. Roca).

Given that many communities did not feel convened or represented by the CAI, for example those that defined themselves as autonomous (Cañumil, Anecon Grande), meetings were held to enable all the diverse forms of the Mapuche people to be given a voice and recognition (Papazian & Nagy, 2015). The category of “rural settlers”, typical of the Río Negro area, refers to Mapuche individuals or families who were expelled from their communities of origin during the military campaign and are therefore recognized as members of the Mapuche people without belonging to a *lof che* (traditional Mapuche territorial community) and who instead live on small plots of land in the rural Patagonian steppe. The three actors – dispersed settlers, communities and Mapuche centres in the cities – all formed a political organization called the *Coordinadora del Parlamento Mapuche de Río Negro* (Coordinating Committee of the Mapuche Parliament of Río Negro) which was legally formalized through the Argentine system in 1997, ten years after it was founded.

In 1994, Argentina underwent a constitutional reform that recognized the pre-existence of Indigenous peoples (36 Indigenous peoples with 14 living languages, the Mapuche being one of these peoples) with the right to intercultural bilingual education (IBE) and cultural rights. This climate of openness to Indigenous demands, linked to the counter-celebratory movement that took place in 1992 (or re-Mapuchization), laid the ground for a process of political organization (Ojeda, 2016) that culminated, in 1997, in the issuing of regulations for provincial law 2287 and recognition of CoDeCi (the Council for the Development of Indigenous Communities) as a co-management body. Until that time, CoDeCi had not been operational, and it began its work with a Land Plan to prevent community evictions. Three Mapuche representatives participated in CoDeCi, one for each of the areas: Atlantic, Andean/Cordillera and Highland Valley. The Land Plan envisages a community land survey in order to obtain title to the land.

There are currently 70 urban communities grouped in the Coordinating Committee of the Mapuche Parliament of Río Negro, out of a total of 150

communities in the province; half of the communities have women occupying the role of “*logko*” or community leader, an autonomous and self-managing position.²⁵ The Mapuche Parliament of Río Negro could have offered an example of community self-government, but, by defining itself according to the provincial jurisdiction, it simply demonstrates how official Argentine history and State imposition have established a method of political construction and direction of political organization for inter-ethnic relations that falls outside the Mapuche worldview.

The emergence — or development — of women community leaders in that area of *Pwelmapu* is striking for two reasons: a) because this way of electing community authorities is not traditionally Mapuche but follows Argentine institutional rules of procedural democracy; and b) because, through these democratic practices, women in Argentina have achieved significant political participation in the public sphere since they won the right to vote in 1947. There is a stark difference between this and *Gulumapu*, where women have experienced great delays in achieving gender parity for election to positions in political parties or unions via the State structures and where everything seems to indicate that this will be the same for the Mapuche community bodies.

Argentine nationalism and Mapuche autonomist demands/practice in collision

The practice of Mapuche medicine continues on both sides of the mountain range. However, in *Pwelmapu* the figure of the *machi* (Mapuche ancestral healer) disappeared for forty years (Azpiroz Cleñan, 2013). Toward the end of the 1970s, the role disappeared with the death of the last *machi* in the central zone of Neuquén Province. In 2009, however, in Bariloche, a young Mapuche girl received her calling²⁶ as a *machi* and began her training at age 12 with the support of another *machi* living in Chile.

Since the young woman had no territorial space in which to carry out her work as a *machi*, the family began a process of communalization (Sabatella, 2011) with the aim of recovering territory. In order to complete the *machi* training process, a *rewe* (spiritual ceremony) has to take place. This cannot be done in a city, according to intra-Mapuche cultural protocols, but must take place in a territory with the natural strength to exercise the function of healing/curing and care.

The community was named *Lafken Wigkul Mapu* and, in 2017, recovered a small territorial space that was under national State administration, in an area known as Lake Mascardi National Park. It forms part of the historical Mapuche territory that was titled as State lands belonging to the nation. This land is in dispute with another Mapuche community known as *Wiritray*. In early November 2017, a judge (Villanueva) issued a court order to evict the community (Correa, 2011). This judge had already shown indications of a desire to challenge Mapuche communities in another nearby province, Chubut.

The members of *Lafken Wigkul Mapu* community did not comply with the eviction order, so there was an attempt to physically evict them. They resisted for two days. The federal police then took several women and children to the police station and held them in custody for more than 12 hours. On the third day, an advance party made up of the special state security command, known as Albatross, was sent in, and the cousin of the young Mapuche girl who was to be a *machi* was assassinated. Rafael Nahuel had gone to the recovered land on November 25 to take food and to support his Mapuche cousin, who was among those resisting eviction. His nickname was “Rafita”. He was a Mapuche youth from a poor neighbourhood of Bariloche who was just embarking on his identity process. His name was Rafael Nahuel, 22 years old.

Tensions between the government and the Mapuche communities escalated to the point that any Mapuche suspected of participating in the recovery of areas near Lake Mascardi, even those inside health posts and the hospital, would be prosecuted. As a result, a number of political actors gathered to intervene in the confrontation between the Mapuche and the security forces, who were refusing to hand over the body of the deceased Rafael Nahuel or to allow the paramedics up the hill to attend to those injured in the shootings during the attempted eviction.

During the repression of *Lafken Wigkul Mapu* community, a Mapuche roundtable was formed, organized by two Mapuche women, Patricia Pichunleo (*wariache*)²⁷ and Lorena Cañuqueo (*Lof Anecón Chico*), who invited leaders of the Coordinating Committee of the Mapuche Parliament of Río Negro to join this initiative. The Catholic Bishop of Bariloche was invited to mediate with the provincial government, and CoDeCi was invited to become a political conflict resolution body.

Human rights organizations, APDH (Permanent Assembly for Human Rights), representatives of the National University of Río Negro, the National

University of Comahue, the Union of State Workers of Río Negro-UNTER (which is a provincial-level union of provincial State workers), the National Institute of Indigenous Affairs (INAI), the Ombudsman of Bariloche, *17 de junio* (June 17 – an organization against police repression), and members of the deliberative council of the city of Bariloche joined the roundtable. Even though it was a direct stakeholders meeting, the National Parks Administration did not participate.

This roundtable was the most important political event to take place during the great repression of the Mapuche people of Río Negro Province by the Argentine State under Macri's administration, since it managed to bring together all the Mapuche communities around the city of Bariloche, human rights organizations, trade unions, and the entire opposition to the national government. This political tool was able to prevent an escalation of violence against those survivors who had remained on the hill, set up an emergency health service for the wounded, coordinate the search for missing persons between police stations and the international airport and obtain the body of the murdered man. The media tried to establish that there had been an armed confrontation because the Mapuche youths were carrying weapons, but this allegation was refuted by the ballistics expert in the judicial case.

The political dialogue was not exclusively linked to the right to health as there is an interdependence between this and demands for collective rights. "Autonomy" in health has become a political project that seeks to overcome inequalities and violence of different kinds. Finally, after a long process, in 2019, the *machiluwün*²⁸ of the young Mapuche woman took place in the recovered territory of the *Lafken Wigkul Mapu* community.

Throughout 2017, the State apparatus clearly defined the Mapuche as public enemy number one, something that became obvious in several events. During that year, Chile and Argentina's ministers of security – Mahmud Aleuy and Patricia Bullrich – met in Buenos Aires to exchange information on the Mapuche organizations. Only a few newspaper reports are available²⁹ with regard to these meetings,³⁰ but they show how a narrative of Mapuche militancy was constructed, along with an alleged transfer of weapons across both sides of the mountain range aimed at deepening Mapuche control across the border.

Bilateral policy during the Macri period defined the main objective of its Indigenous policy as being to implement special security measures for those Mapuche organizations that defined themselves as autonomist. These included

the most prominent in Argentina: *Resistencia Ancestral Mapuche* (Mapuche Ancestral Resistance / RAM), which was inspired by and follows the tenets of the *Coordinadora Arauco Malleco* (Arauco Malleco Coordinating Body / CAM) of Chile. This latter has been building a discourse around Mapuche autonomy since the 1990s, influencing/filtering over to *Pwelmapu*.

CAM skirts around the edges of armed violence with a rhetoric that promotes self-defence and *de facto* land recoveries. This is their publicly stated method. Their action focuses on the estates/properties occupied by logging companies and also on sabotaging the trucks and machinery used by that industry. According to statements made to the press by one of their spokespersons, Héctor Llaitúl, his organization has two features: one is the use of force and the other:

... an above all anti-capitalist focus. Both as a definition and also as a political practice. That is why CAM is a revolutionary organization. It confronts capital, and that confrontation generates conflict. And this has made us anti-oligarchic, anti-colonialist and anti-imperialist. Based on the reality and fate of our people, we have burst onto the scene as an autonomous, Mapuche and revolutionary movement. This has made us the object of the State's attention as well as that of detractors of the Mapuche cause, from within the historical oligarchy and national and international capital. We have thus become the enemy within the Chilean State. (Ñuke mapu, 2010)³¹

After several forceful actions by CAM in the 2000s, the Chilean police and intelligence services imposed themselves on the daily life of the communities, drastically changing their way of life. According to Almeida Filho (2000), way of life relates to daily social practices that are defined by geography, historical tradition, values, norms and means of production, as well as production relations for subsistence, all of which contributes to the social reproduction of life. Almeida Filho draws on Heller's (1977) definition to characterize this way of life as the quality of continuity: something that always happens, every day, in the everyday, i.e., it involves a dimension of time and repetition.

This change in way of life resulted in more than ten Mapuche being killed in territorial recovery processes during the period of Chilean democracy.³² The Chilean Armed Forces also scaled up their patrols in areas where CAM

leaders lived. All this preventive, repressive action ended up turning into a real and renewed occupation of Araucanía.

In Argentina, leader Facundo Jones Huala, from the community of *Pu Lof en Resistencia del Departamento Cushamen* in Chubut Province (Sabatella, 2017) has ended up being the counterpart to the CAM's Llaitúl, his being the Mapuche rhetoric with the greatest media echo heard/developed during 2017. Huala was born in the suburbs of Bariloche and made contact with CAM leaders during their process of identitary strengthening. The origins of Huala's³³ autonomist discourse can be traced back to *Gulumapu*. He is currently a political prisoner in Chile (extradited to Chile from Argentina).

Huala has publicly maintained his dissent with the historical leaders of Confe and the Mapuche Coordinating Committee of Río Negro. He does not come from a traditional Mapuche *lof che* (territory) in *Pwelmapu* and does not speak *Mapuzugun* (Mapuche language) as his mother tongue, learning it only as a second language; he furthermore did not spend his childhood in a rural environment. The Mapuche Ancestral Resistance (RAM) never claimed responsibility for any violence but only carried out street publicity actions, so its actual strength was never demonstrated. Huala, at times, referred to RAM but did not involve his community in it, so its true composition was never known.

For the rural Mapuche of Río Negro, the narrative of Huala and *Pu Lof Cushamen*³⁴ is somewhat dissonant, both in its pace and in its way of expressing Mapuche *sentipensar* (feeling/thinking; a concept that comes from the tradition of R. Kush, and which proposes thinking located in territory). The Clarín media monopoly, however, decided that Huala would be considered the spokesperson of the Mapuche. Through their influencers, the right-wing in Argentina have ridiculed Mapuche aesthetics, statements and positions. The media managed to interview Huala inside Esquel prison at the height of the judicial case for the disappearance of Santiago Maldonado. In the Mapuche *sentipensar* (Kush, 1967), Huala's narrative was embedded neither in Chubut nor in Río Negro. It was embedded in Buenos Aires city and Greater Buenos Aires, among the anarcho-punk and pro-Trotskyist groups.

In one of his public statements to the Telesur channel, Huala mentioned that the conflict with the State was the result of the State's ignorance of "the ancestral ownership of the lands and the international principle of the peoples' self-determination."³⁵ By this way of thinking, self-determination would be born not so much out of the Mapuche people's traditional form

of decision-making itself but out of public international law. In the same interview, he went on to state that Mapuche resistance in Argentina was born “out of poverty, discrimination and State violence, from which a generation of young militants has emerged and is beginning to organize the Mapuche struggle, a resistance in response to the historical violence of the Argentine State.” The terms by which he understands the Mapuche struggle therefore rule out dialogue with the State.

Huala raised the concept of the *weichafe* (warrior) in his narrative, as the figure that creates the conditions for autonomy in the territories undergoing re-territorialization. In the territory recovered by his community from Benetton,³⁶ however, there were no material conditions for the reproduction of their way of life given that they constantly had to resort to the solidarity of other communities and other Argentine national collectives to sustain their recovery while he was imprisoned in Argentina.

To provide a gendered perspective to the Mapuche organizations in this case, it can be seen that, in times of repression and very cruel moments, it has been the Mapuche women and their children who have occupied the public theatre of violence against the Mapuche. They were not the *weichafe*. Women would become trapped with their very young children, and their houses set on fire in their presence, along with their toys, etc. The *weichafe* would flee in times of repression to avoid being imprisoned, shot or tortured. That was a constant throughout 2017.

In the Mapuche narrative, the concept of *weichafe* refers to the masculine, there was no room for the feminine here, and this is why an intra-Mapuche gender imbalance became embedded, and also a masculinization of the practices of female territorial protection. After this process, Mapuche women leaders would proclaim themselves *weichafe* in public appearances in the mass media, in response to a preconceived image that was having an impact on the audience. Although principles of complementarity and reciprocity appear in the Mapuche narrative of women, patriarchy has been inherent in the Mapuche way of life and, during 2017, the exaltation of masculine values for self-defence was more in evidence than the complementarity of a way of protecting the recovered territory.

In terms of discourse, the autonomist narrative was indecipherable for the media, who did not understand its scope, fearing that it would end up as a demand for separation from the Argentine State. Those sectors of Argentine society that were linked to the social movements, to Peronism and human

rights organizations, were predisposed to or supportive of the Mapuche's demands for territorial recovery, especially the recovery of land from a landowner of Italian origin, Benetton. There was shakier support when it came to their demand for autonomy, however, since the leadership of *Pu Lof Cushamen* did not clearly set out the link between citizenship, autonomy and the specific rights of a Mapuche people-nation as a political subject. There seemed to be an inability to distinguish the concept of Mapuche nation from that of the Argentine nation. This was not clear in several interviews with the leaders of *Pu Lof Cushamen*, *Lafken Wigkul Mapu*, the Mapuche Confederation of Neuquén and the Coordinating Committee of the Mapuche Parliament of Río Negro. They were unable to describe the components of a concept of nation that was distinct from Argentinity. They either did not make explicit or were unable to describe the distinct ethnic conditions that marked their non-membership of the "Argentine nation".

There were three successes in the construction of the Mapuche narrative from within their own organizations in relation to territorial rights: a) opposition to political sovereignty (Argentine) versus the transfer of lands into foreign hands (Benetton); b) linking the interests of Macri and his cabinet (Bullrich) to the interests of the financiers of "Roca's Campaign" (the "Conquest of the Desert") as a thread of historical continuity; and c) opposing the sacredness of private property, the notion of territory as sacred.

This last point deserves special attention given that the naturalization of private property as a structural factor in the functioning of a modern and liberal State was publicly discussed in sessions of the Congress of the Argentine Nation in that same year of 2017. During the parliamentary debate on extending National Law No. 26160,³⁷ the conflict over private property escalated. Law 26160 was the mechanism prior to approval of an Indigenous Community Property Law in Argentina, enabled on the basis of a Reform of Article 18 of the Civil and Commercial Code in 2012.

Senator Pichetto, national senator for Río Negro Province, stated the following during the debate in the Senate of the Nation:

For me there is no sacred land in Argentina. There cannot be any Argentine space that is not under the jurisdiction of the authorities. This is not tolerable from the point of view of constitutional logic: "I am sure that the vast majority of the Mapuche

community in no way shares the violent perspective of the RAM (Mapuche Ancestral Resistance).”

This senator was later to become vice-presidential candidate in 2019 on the Macri-Pichetto ticket that lost to the *Frente de Todos* (Front for All) Fernández-Fernández ticket with 48% of the vote. With this new presidency, the issue of Mapuche demands and actions for autonomy has momentarily evaporated. The COVID-19 pandemic has obscured the public agenda on private property.

Alberto Fernández’ national government has swung back and forth with respect to the property regime in force in Argentina. I will cite five cases over the ten months of the current administration: 1) attempted expropriation of the Vicentín company (agri-food export) to convert it into a mixed public-private/cooperative company; 2) statements on the amendment of private property laws for access to land for habitat and housing, contemplating the social function of property; 3) financial support to workers’ self-managed cooperative enterprises; 4) silence regarding the evictions of Indigenous communities in northern Argentina; and 5) silence on the appropriation of bodies of water and Lago Escondido by a North American businessman. Strong media pressure from the Clarín group and the concentrated power of the Argentine economy linked to the financial powers-that-be is preventing progress in a broad social and political debate that could reshape the economy and politics during the pandemic. So far, several draft bills have been tabled before the National Congress that would offer a political solution and legal security to guarantee Indigenous community ownership of the Indigenous territories currently occupied.

Conclusions

The discourse on autonomy and Mapuche self-government is not gaining a foothold in the realms of possibility within *Pwelmapu* because the conditions for exercising autonomy are not in place. This is due to:

The lack of a defined territorial space in which to exercise total political-economic control and in which the Mapuche people could be self-sufficient in terms of food. There is no demarcated territory in *Pwelmapu* in which to exercise a territorialist path to

autonomy. The area of *Pwelmapu* is three times larger than that of *Gulumapu*, and has a smaller Mapuche population, which makes interpersonal encounters difficult. Because of this, it has not been possible to agree to a communitarian path to autonomy among the Mapuche organizations, as suggested by Nagüil (2010). Perhaps they need to start from the grassroots or in a more modest way, recovering *Mapuzungun* (Mapuche language) as an initial condition for building the symbolic territoriality of a Mapuche political community.

Members of the Mapuche people are highly dependent on salaries and clientelist relationships in some provinces (Neuquén 43%, Río Negro 37%, in terms of State jobs)³⁸ and this limits or affects the Mapuche's different areas of political participation in terms of being an autonomist movement.

There is no clarity as regards the autonomist project or how the movement for autonomy will be financed, nor are there significant political discussions between present and former *logko* (leaders) as to what path this should take. And, from a gendered perspective, there is a high level of competition among the “*machos*” (males) who act as leaders, overshadowing the political fabric of Mapuche women. This is another determining factor that makes it impossible to reach agreements by which to build a path to autonomy through *pwelche* (people of *Pwelmapu*). These are micro-experiences that are socially uncoordinated on a macro level in *Pwelmapu*.

The path to the Mapuche nation's political autonomy in *Pwelmapu* could, however, offer a source of alliances between organizations, a space for negotiating local leaderships that are not yet coordinated at the level of *fütal mapu* (great Mapuche confederation). It could also be a source of temporary alliances with Argentine solidarity movements. Everything seems to indicate that the electoral route, as in Chile, is a way of re-shaping the colonial State into a plurinational one, as a path to political autonomy in *Pwelmapu*.

Autonomist ideas are found in *Pwelmapu* as the result of a collective political identity that generates an “I-us” without the State's permission, in

the face of the “otherness” united around the Argentine identity. However, there is no proposal for building power, either economically or by electoral means, and far less by armed means, which has already failed in *Gulumapu*. There have been some achievements in terms of placing the issue of autonomy on the public agenda in a largely whitewashed society that justifies a monocultural and monolingual State despite the fact that more than fourteen Indigenous languages are spoken in the country.

Autonomy with specific *pwelche* features needs to be achieved through alliances between micro-experiences aimed at strategically recovering the meaning of politics. Politics is composed of agreements, alliances and strategies in pursuit of an idea. Ours is the reconstruction of *Pwelmapu* as a territorial space for life and for *küme felen* (good living) with all the internal diversities and heterogeneities that lie within it. We are a demographic minority in *Pwelmapu* and so politics realistically means recognizing this and creating alliances with other sectors of the Argentine population that are suffering similar problems. The *reche* (pure people) alone are not enough, nor are the *weichafe* (warriors). We will need all the colours and shapes of the Mapuche women, all of whom continue to exist in *Pwelmapu*.

NOTES

- 1 Historic Mapuche territory east of the Andes Mountains, in what is now Argentina.
- 2 Procedural democracy is a type of formal, non-substantive democracy that recognizes the system of accessing government but not the exercise of democratic political practice at the electoral interface. Bobbio (1985) calls the normative principles pertaining to the process for accessing a form of government the “procedural universals” of democracy.
- 3 *Pwelche* is the cultural identity of Mapuche people born in the *Pwelmapu*: on the eastern side of the historical Mapuche territory.
- 4 I use the ironic concept “Colonial spokespersons” to refer to those politicians who justify the Hispanicization, evangelization and construction of Argentina as a melting pot to hide the genocide on which the foundations of the Argentine State were laid.
- 5 Mapuche activist, of *guluche* (western *Mapuche*) origin, who triggered Mapuche re-ethnification processes in *Pwelmapu*.
- 6 Argentina has 23 provinces plus the Autonomous City of Buenos Aires.
- 7 The paper used to print newspapers in the provinces of Río Negro and Neuquén, for example, comes from a single supplier, the economic group Clarín. Clarín defines the editorial and political line of the newspapers to which it sells newsprint. If they do not follow Clarín’s political guidelines, the provincial newspapers are not provided with the basic supplies needed for their print circulation. It is an inherent practice of applying

pressure. The following gives details of the court case for the company's buy-out during the military dictatorship and the investigation that took place during the pro-Kirchner governments: <http://www.nuestrasvoces.com.ar/investigaciones/asi-robaron-papel-prensa/>; <https://miramardiario.com/index.php/2021/09/16/asi-robaron-papel-prensa-2/>; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B2hXH_b5mN4; <https://www.lapoliticaonline.com/nota/nota-69652/>; <https://www.pagina12.com.ar/85253-la-corte-cerro-la-causa-por-papel-prensa>

- 8 Available at <https://www.tiempoar.com.ar/monitor-de-medios/el-poder-detras-de-los-medios>
- 9 This discourse already existed in a substratum of Argentine Society, but the president inflamed it. Mauricio Macri belongs to a part of the Argentine oligarchy, a beneficiary of the territorial dispossession of the Mapuche. Some of his government team had relatives who participated in the “Conquest of the Desert”, either as military personnel or financial backers. The Bullrich family, for example, had two ministers in Macri's cabinet (Patricia Bullrich, Minister of Security, and Esteban Bullrich, Minister of Education) and was directly involved in expropriating large tracts of Mapuche land. Esteban Bullrich vindicated the “Conquest of the Desert” during the 2016 election campaign in the city of Choele Choel, Río Negro Province, a place marked by a great slaughter of the Mapuche (<https://bit.ly/2UglxqE>).
- 10 Clarín, the monopoly that runs the Argentine media, comprises more than 250 companies linked to the economic group. They control the print press.
- 11 Available at https://www.rionegro.com.ar/cuales-son-los-argumentos-politicos-de-la-pretendida-nacion-mapuche-JRRN_5598965/
- 12 Ideologically, communism and liberalism are polar opposites.
- 13 Available at <https://bit.ly/2IesuGD>
- 14 The expression “arriving off the boats” refers to the European immigrants who arrived on ships sailing to the Río de la Plata in Argentina's first massive wave of migration. The Mapuche world uses this phrase as an identity marker to differentiate themselves from the *wigka*. The Patagonian provinces use the category “first inhabitants” to recognize the Indigenous presence on their territory.
- 15 Available at <https://bit.ly/2UfjNOI>
- 16 Further on, I will show how the city of Bariloche is a physical space marked by monuments to military figures such as Roca and others, just as — during the last military dictatorship — it became a refuge for German Nazis being hunted by the international justice system (Erick Priebke, for example). Roca was the Argentine army general who led the military campaign against the Mapuche people known as the “Conquest of the Desert”.
- 17 The Catholic bishop, De Nevares, linked the “*logko*” of the oldest rural communities to make joint land titling claims through the incipient provincial government.
- 18 The organized labour movement in Argentina has a long tradition of political struggle, especially during Perón's first presidency. Since then, the unions have been a very significant political player in the political life of Argentina's democracy, as have the

human rights organizations since the last military dictatorship. Many State workers were and are of Mapuche origin and have received union and political training through teachers' and educators' unions, State unions and, more recently, oil and mining unions.

- 19 Available at <https://bit.ly/3lIPiFS>
- 20 It is interesting to look at the paths of Nahuel and Huala, as they show differences by age, by *tuwün* – their territory of origin, by the organization from which they emerged, and by the path of their process of formation or re-Mapuchization.
- 21 Available at <https://bit.ly/35ENjE4>
- 22 Available at <https://bit.ly/38XFtTb>
- 23 Available at <https://bit.ly/3f9UnLV>
- 24 Available at <http://www.laizquierdadiario.com/Bariloche-comunidad-mapuche-Buenuleo-denuncia-ingreso-de-patotas-a-sus-territorios>
- 25 Available at <https://bit.ly/3lF1Mp5>
- 26 Receiving one's calling as a *machi* does not mean attending university to practise medicine, where anyone could study the career; it is instead something with which one is born such that, by lineage (*kepalme*) or territory (*tuwün*), the person's healing spirit can be developed, if their family and community so decide, in order to respond to a cultural responsibility that manifests itself in the body/spiritual belief.
- 27 A person living in the city, dispossessed of his or her territory.
- 28 Ritual ceremony consecrating a person as a *machi*, a traditional Mapuche doctor.
- 29 Available at <https://bit.ly/36N7HCb>
- 30 There is no information on how the agenda was handled between the two countries. In Argentina, there is a guarantee under the right to information that public officials must provide information on the subjects and people they receive in their hearings.
- 31 Source: Mapuche Documentation Centre, Ñuke Mapu. <https://bit.ly/32VYZR0>
- 32 A concept developed by O'Donnell, in *Teoría de la transición de las dictaduras militares latinoamericanas hacia la democracia*, where the case of Chile is established as a hard democracy in order to designate the union of a democratic regime that uses elections for the renewal of political authorities but whose government mechanics have authoritarian indications, for example, the senators for life that Pinochet installed over the course of a whole decade in the Chilean parliament.
- 33 The relationship built between Huala and CAM's most media-friendly leader, Héctor Llaitul, had its ups and downs. However, after being extradited to Chile, he did visit him in prison.
- 34 A new community that recovered a small territory from the landowner Benetton, near the northern area of Chubut, known as Cushamen.
- 35 Available at <https://bit.ly/3kEtQaO>
- 36 Italian businessman who owns a million hectares bought from Compañías del Sud, the

- company that took over Mapuche territory after Roca's military campaign. One of the shareholders of Compañías del Sud was the Bullrich family.
- 37 Law 28160 suspended the evictions of Indigenous communities and the Territorial Survey Program of historical occupied lands, current and sufficient.
- 38 The author has taken data on the Economically Active Population (EAP) of the two provinces in question from 2010 census microdata.

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