

# EMISFÉRICA

## *Imperial Impersonations: Chilean Racism and the War of the Pacific*

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Bolivians, the Chilean Admiral José Toribio Merino infamously remarked near the end of the twentieth century, are no more than “metamorphosized camelids [*auquénidos metamorfoseados*], who have learned to speak, but not to think.” This slur, uttered by one of the founding members of Pinochet’s military junta, was made in reference to the Bolivian state’s on-going efforts to reclaim territory lost to Chile over a century earlier, during the War of the Pacific (1879-1884). Fought for control over nitrate deposits in Peru and Bolivia, this war resulted in Chile’s annexation of wide swaths of both nations’ territories, an outcome that has left Bolivia landlocked up to the present. It was also during this war that Chile occupied the city of Lima for nearly two years, a humiliation that is burned into Peruvian national memory.

Merino’s recourse to the most naked form of racism in a discussion of geopolitical matters (precisely, the question of Bolivia’s access to the sea) is not entirely shocking given the genealogy of discourses of Chilean national sovereignty from the nineteenth century to the present. Instead, in characterizing Bolivians as barely-evolved animals, Merino was repeating elements of a discourse that was itself constituted during the War of the Pacific, as Chilean state actors justified their military aggression as an inevitable conflict between “superior” and “inferior” races. During this war, the historically contingent boundaries of the nation-state became reimagined by Chilean elites as contiguous with a pre-ordained racial destiny, in the formulation of an enduring myth of Chilean racial superiority vis-à-vis its Andean neighbors.

The War of the Pacific was fought over nitrates, a highly lucrative export commodity used as a fertilizer in Europe, and the Chilean aggressors were backed financially and morally by neocolonial British interests (Amayo 1998; Vitale 1993). British empire also provided a discursive framework through which the Chilean state articulated its right to rule. Borrowing the language of the “civilizing mission” and “white man’s burden,” the Chilean state assumed the mantle of imperial right, a move that at once erased British neocolonial interests from view and situated Chile within the fold of “white” nations, fulfilling the destiny of “civilization” on a global scale.

The cornerstone of Chilean imperial identity during the War of the Pacific was whiteness, a racial category that went far beyond phenotype to vouch for the virility, discipline, and morality of a homogenized “Chilean race.” Peruvian and Bolivian creoles, mestizos, Indians, blacks and Chinese, in contrast, were coded as racially degenerate, with inferiority measured in terms of effeminacy, laziness and backwardness. One of the key figures in the articulation of this racial discourse was Benjamín Vicuña Mackenna, the noted nineteenth-century historian and statesman (figure 1). In the newspaper Vicuña Mackenna founded to cover the war, *El Nuevo Ferrocarril*, the historian framed Chilean

aggression as “(t)he noble march and the even more noble conquest of work, of creative order, and of vigorous industry” against the “torpid laziness and incurable disorder of other races,” who had allowed their territories “to become barren and sterile.” (Vicuña Mackenna 1879a<sup>1</sup>). Rehearsing the central tropes of nineteenth-century Northern European empire, here bourgeois economic ideology expresses itself through a lexicon of *racial* difference.

The War of the Pacific marked a moment in which Chilean elites rewrote national history and identity through the categories offered by an already established vocabulary of nineteenth-century Northern European imperial reason. As a political project, Chilean racism has proven an extremely effective arm of state reason, at the same time as its potency has been contradicted by the real configurations of empire on a global scale (in which Chile is not an empire, but a distant periphery). This contradiction is proper to the appropriation of the language and politics of imperial reason by a peripheral nation, one which might best be grasped as a strategy of imperial impersonation. The term “imperial impersonation” can be understood in the context of the War of the Pacific as the will to occupy the discursive space of the European colonizer vis-à-vis neighboring nations. Another prominent nineteenth-century historian, Diego Barros Arana, wrote a history of the War before it had ended and noted that Chile was an exception among nations of the continent. In it he claimed its people had “mixed little with Indians” after the Conquest, and that as a result, Chile is home to “an active and serious race,” one that “wants to equal the British, and which one traveler has compared to the Dutch family” (Barros Arana 1914: 16).

This ongoing establishment of European racial credentials—passing through categories such as morality, virility and work ethic—allowed Chilean elites to extract their nation from a shared history with its neighbors, and to imagine Chile as a global agent of white civilization. It was through this metonymic transfer that Chilean newspapers could argue, for example, that soldiers should annihilate Peruvian and Bolivians in the same manner as the British were annihilating the Zulus in South Africa (qtd. in Sater, 31-32). Theaters of the war such as the Atacama Desert and Lima became stages for impersonation techniques, with agents garbed in the pomp of European empire. In another article by Vicuña Mackenna, the historian culls lessons from the French experience in Algeria to properly protect Chilean soldiers in the inhospitable desert climate of Southern Peru. One of his recommendations is that Chilean soldiers be fed, like their French counterparts, a diet of *café noir* and rice (Vicuña Mackenna 1879b: 1). Throughout the occupation of Lima, Chilean correspondents marked this city as “tropical” and degenerate (in contrast with the more temperate climes of Chile), and markedly “Oriental.” Erasing more than three centuries of shared history, Vicuña Mackenna compares Lima—the center of Spanish colonial power in South America—with Cairo, awaiting colonization by whites (Vicuña Mackenna 1880b, 2).

These strategies of imperial impersonation were buttressed by specific claims about the racial inferiority of Peruvians and Bolivians.<sup>2</sup> In “The Army of Tupac Amaru,” Vicuña Mackenna writes that the Peruvian army is “completely Indian, entirely indigenous and quechua,” for the historian clear evidence of its inability to withstand Chilean aggression

(1880b: 2). In addition to familiar characterizations of Indians as “inert” and “passive,” Vicuña’s racist discourse constantly animalizes and feminizes. The Peruvian Indian, for example, is characterized as not a man (*macho*), but a mule (*mula*). And the racial “variety” of Lima, including mestizos, blacks, and Chinese (a constant theme in wartime reports), is in turn characterized as akin to the collection of animals at a Barnum and Bailey circus (Ibid). An engraving appearing in Vicuña Mackenna’s newspaper takes racialized degradation into the field of visual representation. Following the outlines of European racial “types,” “Physionomies of the Allied Army” depicts the heads of Peruvian and Bolivian soldiers from a side view, drawn with flat foreheads and noses, protruding lower lips, slanted eyes, and either iron-straight or tightly curled hair (figure 2). The accompanying text reads: “That army is quite notable, most of all, for its variety of races, which are almost a variety of species and which almost authorizes the assumption that man comes from the ape or from ... the elephant” (“Fisionomías”: 3).

Like all racist discourses, Chile’s imperial-inspired version was rife with contradictions, within the nation, but also vis-à-vis the European examples it sought to imitate. Chilean racism obliged creole elites to “impersonate” metropolitan authorities at the same time as the very act of impersonation could easily become a site of inferiority or artificiality (a logic defined in larger terms by Carlos Alonso [1998] as “the burden of modernity”). This is not to say that Chilean whiteness fell short of “the real thing”—as if such a thing existed outside of racist fantasy—but rather that the very categories established by European empire might be used to uphold or undermine peripheral claims to authority.

Chile’s imperial self-image was upheld by some important material results: following the annexation of Peruvian and Bolivian nitrate fields, the state mobilized to “pacify” its racialized internal enemies, the Mapuche Indians of the South. The maximum expression of post-War imperial optimism was the state’s acquisition of an economically unimportant but symbolically significant South Seas colony, Easter Island.<sup>3</sup> Yet the verisimilitude of Chilean “empire” could not endure for long: the opening of the Panama Canal, along with the invention of synthetic nitrates in Europe, relegated Chile once again to the distant periphery of capitalist world production by the early twentieth century. As a vestige of imperial victories in the War of the Pacific, Chileans would proudly remain “the British of South America,” but citizens of South America nonetheless.

The lasting power of Chilean empire matters less than the continuing effects of its claims about racial difference and belonging. In the past decade, Peruvian immigrants in Chile—employed mainly as service workers—have been constant targets of racism, often phrased in the same dehumanizing terms as those rehearsed during the War of the Pacific. Projecting outside the nation, Chilean identity remains deeply embedded within claims to Europeaness. Appeals to the country’s “racial homogeneity,” temperate climate, industriousness, and institutional stability are fundamental to national identity, and have proven quite useful when courting foreign capital. The problem here is not, again, that the Chilean nation might only imperfectly or incompletely wield the discourse of white supremacy, but rather the extent to which this discourse retains legitimacy today, in Latin America and beyond.

## Endnotes

1 All references from *El Nuevo Ferrocarril* were collected at the library of the Museo Nacional Benjamín Vicuña Mackenna in Santiago, Chile. Translations are my own.

2 It is important to note that Chilean elites did not have a monopoly on racist discourse; nineteenth-century elites in Peru and Bolivia had themselves relied upon notions of white supremacy to establish their right to rule. Thus part of the effectiveness of racism as wielded during the War of the Pacific was that it was common currency of post-Independence Latin American elites. In the War of the Pacific, Chilean elites were able to manipulate European racial hierarchies to their advantage, turning them against their creole counterparts in Peru and Bolivia.

3 For centuries, Spanish colonizers and creole elites had been able to gain control of the Mapuche-dominated Araucanía. It was only in 1883, as Chile was still embroiled in the War of the Pacific, that the region was finally brought under state control; as in the United States and Argentina, this campaign was made possible by the genocidal combination of state armies, railways, and firearms. Easter Island, in turn, was claimed by Chile in 1888. At this time, Easter Island was the only South Seas island to remain unclaimed by a European power. Since then, the island has carried mainly symbolic significance for Chile, captured in the image of the *moais* (ancient Rapa Nui sculptures), which today decorate everything from Chilean tour guides to advertisements for airlines and telephone companies.

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