

The genocide of indigenous peoples in the formation of the Argentine Nation-State¹

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What effect on the constitution of a state has the fact that it was generated by war? . . . What are the stigmas remaining in its body? Foucault (1976, p 98)

These questions, posed by Foucault during a seminar at the College de France between 1975 and 1976, led me to question my own works on indigenous peoples in Argentina. I was aware that the seminar concluded on the same day that a *coup d'état* took place in Argentina; this fact is not a minor coincidence. The *coup* brought to power the last military dictatorship in that nation, a regime whose methodology of the “forced disappearance” of persons had as its precedent—not by chance—the practices the Nazis used in Germany. This dictatorship echoed a regime that committed the genocide of 30,000 citizens, an act that collective memory is still trying to understand. My own questions in this article, derived from Foucault’s question, include this one: is the forced disappearance of persons a part of war—part of a race war—whose stigmas remain in the body of the Argentine state? And this question evokes another question: the Argentinean army assumed as state policy its so-called “final solution” of the indigenous question, and carried this out at the end of the nineteenth century. Can this fact be one of the keys to an attempt at an archeological elaboration that makes it possible to answer the first question? These questions and answers, in turn, lead us to a third question: how can the state construct a war discourse directed at its own population groups with a certain degree of efficacy?

Before proceeding, however, I am interested in making a preliminary clarification. When I speak about war, I do not refer to the current and usual meaning of the word—that is, a declared war between two nation states, disputing authority over territories, populations, resources, etc. Rather, I refer to a domestic war within the Nation-State, that is, a state’s production of a military device based on the defining of “lawful violence” as natural, and the deployment of this “lawful, natural” violence against a domestic enemy in the defense of “national interests,”² that is, the state’s justification of such a domestic war which

becomes genocide, the aim of which is the elimination of the so-called domestic enemy.

I find the first problem to be solved, one which has been one of the European questions with reference to the genocide committed by the Nazis. As I stated earlier, we must inquire about the possibility of a resignification of the discourse. On what new terms can we discuss a race war which the state—and here we speak about the modern state—wages against its own inhabitants? Can we resignify the discourse about the legitimation of the state's exercise of sovereignty, when such legitimacy rests, according to the fundamentals of the hegemonic political doctrine, precisely on the delegation of power to the state by the inhabitants of that state? The answer to this problem has a name: state racism. Foucault analyzed as a paradigm the Nazi doctrine, positing a superior race which controls the state, which seeks to legitimize the factory it creates to manufacture the death of its own citizens. He understood this paradigm as a representative situation; far from being intelligible as a circumstantial aberration produced by monsters, we may understand such a situation as the outcome of the potential weakness of modern capitalist states which cannot make room in their political economy for the illuminist ideals set up as a model. In analyzing the causes of state racism, Feierstein suggests that the idea is to avoid "the denial of the nature of genocide" as long as it is considered a demonic fact (2000, p 114). The existence of state racism is the foundation of genocide processes in modern states. State racism does not only respond to the stigmas it constructs to justify its discrimination. It not only supports the death of the other by maximizing diacritic differential features; it also responds to the fact that such stigmas are configured as symptoms of what the capitalist state cannot produce as a system: a harmonic relationship between controlling capital and the labor over which it exercises its control.

I am not trying to forcibly expand the concept of genocide to include the problems of class struggle in order to avoid specific analysis of the concept. In order to understand this issue, however, I intend to show that the transition from race war to state racism cannot be understood merely as a circumstantial restoration of "primitivism" in a modern state, while the state evolves toward becoming a society built on consensus and contract. Thus, for instance, the Hobbesian operation comes into play, in which inventing a race war in distant ethnographic societies is a part of the reflective construction (the anthropological metaphor of the mirror) produced by the political doctrine of modernity which allows a state to look at its policies and acts as "evolutionary" improvements.

Notwithstanding the noble intentions expressed in certain doctrines which support differential rights and policies of recognition, I maintain that a capitalist state without state racism is nothing but an illusion built on ideology. This is so not only because the state proposes to develop mechanisms aimed at concealing racism without ever succeeding because such mechanisms exist, but mainly because trying to do so many times actually encourages racism. The encouragement of state racism is many a time born from the intent and attempt to obtain a formal and legal recognition of differences of sex, ethnicity, age, etc. Distinct

class differences emerge during such attempts, caused by the expansion of capitalist production relations in the contemporary world which social inequalities do not overcome but rather deepen. Here, I am interested in examining the formation of state racism, and the genocidal practices flowing from it in Argentina, in the light of the criticism against the political economy which has nurtured it.

I am not trying to blur what is particular, but to make the particular distinguishable within the limits of the ideological (universalistic) production of capital. I hold here that, at least in the Argentine case, the state tried to legitimize its war against its “own” population groups by using two ideological operations: first, it tended to produce the stigmatized delimitation of otherness in terms of foreignness (once the nationalist narrative was set in motion).³ Second, it inflated the supposed war capacities which would justify its violence, by referring to the dangers posed by the internal enemy. The most recent evidence of such an operation is the so-called “theory of the two devils.” It aimed to safeguard the so-called “civil society’s endorsement of the genocide the last dictatorship perpetrated, by attributing it to a war that was not justified but was configured by the existence of armed sectors of population who the military corporation in power (even though with ‘excesses’) had to repress.” This theory was widely analyzed and criticized by human rights organizations in Argentina, and has served to conceal the deepest causes for the existence of the past dictatorship and the genealogy of state racism.

The ideological operation, the genocide process, was an effort to cover key historiographic components of the national political archeology, including first of all the dictatorial heritage of democratic mechanisms and practices at some “moments” of the modern history of Argentine politics. Those democratic forms did not arise from the recognition of the legitimacy of demands and/or from social uprisings, but rather as “exits” from crises caused by the economic policies dictatorships applied. In the same discursive vein, the second component is made up of the reproduction of the “armed enemy” fiction. The dictatorship can theoretically consider an armed enemy who uses violent methods to be illegitimate, and can thus justify stigmatizing that “enemy” for its association with extra-national interests. But, then, is the people’s violence against a dictatorship truly illegitimate? Or is the state supreme beyond any illegitimate or legitimate “form” of government? Two facts are concealed here, one, that armed organizations arose within the framework of anti-dictatorial struggles in Argentina in the sixties and seventies, and two, that commanders have shown and even acknowledged this reality in some passages of the so-called “trial of the military junta,” a junta that was practically defeated when the last military *coup d’état* occurred. Against these realities, an attempt was made to impose a war discourse.

Although the Argentine indigenous peoples remained shut out of the political pact of the new modernity, the dictatorship cast them as enemies without a homeland, and employed rhetoric that inflated their war capacity. The movement of the political economy towards the alienation of public and private assets

required the transformation of the indigenous and a “glorious youth” into a subversive and unpatriotic enemy.

From the melting pot of races to state racism

In opposition to the above affirmations, one of the most widespread ideas about the identity of Argentineans is the anthropological metaphor which states: “Argentineans descend from ships.” This metaphor, unendingly repeated, has two associated and contradictory senses. The first is that successive migrations of Europeans, who occupied an empty territory, configured the national population and, through their colonizing effort, gradually incorporated the nation into the world market. Its second and opposite sense is that this is the national identity characteristic which allows Argentina to differentiate itself from other Latin American nations: Argentina is cast as a transplanted part of Europe.

This view compares the construction of the Argentine nationality to that of the United States, reinforcing the sense of exception attached to the Argentine identity. This discursive construction is supported, both by the national demography—since most of the Argentine population has European roots, because of the state policy applied during the so-called “formation period” (1853–1930), which strongly promoted immigration as a civilization model—and by the writings of the intellectuals who made up the “generation of 1980.” Thus, for instance, for writer Domingo Faustino Sarmiento, the incorporation of a European population into Argentina promoted higher national culture, in which he believed natives were unable to participate.⁴ On the other hand, Juan Bautista Alberdi, with his motto “to govern is to populate,” promoted the idea that the problem in Argentina was not natives but the lack of population.

The above-mentioned demographic reality, and the doctrinal models proposed by the organic intellectuals who lay the foundation for the design of a modern state in Argentina, are visible aspects of an issue which must be examined in the light of the initial questions this essay poses. We must analyze data that casts doubt on ideas lodged in the collective social imagery, one of which is the notion of a “civilized” population. An indicator of the ideological nature of Sarmiento’s affirmations lies in what he says is his main concern, which is education: the 1895 census indicated that, while the country’s overall illiterate population amounted to 58.1 percent, among Italian immigrants it was 61.8 percent, and among Spanish immigrants 66.9 percent. Such difference remains in the 1935 census, and even in subsequent censuses (Juliano, 1987, p 92). The same may be said about the slogan “to govern is to populate,” since the native population was in line with the prevailing extensive cattle exploitation applied by the landowning oligarchy as their chosen production method.

Only the new state’s local public economic transformation project can explain the ideology which boosted the need for immigration. Argentina carried out plans immediately after the so-called “final solution”—applied to the indigenous populations—was concluded. Such transformations mainly affected cattle production. After the growth of the ovine exploitation in mid-nineteenth century, a process

started at the century's end by which bovine production for meat-processing plants became widespread. Crossbreeding also improved the quality of the stock and production in the humid pampas, with the purpose of accessing international markets (Giberti, 1985, pp 176–187). Leasing and wire fencing of land were also developed as predominant forms of access to and control of land in the most fertile areas (the humid pampas and the littoral region). At the time, Argentina started providing low cost salary assets to the world market, in order to meet industrial capital's demands to maintain salaries at levels that did not compete with the profit available through the increase in land rental.⁵

At “the frontier,” which was still a hinterland not yet dominated by the tiny minority the cattle-raising bourgeoisie represented, such movement of the political economy was supported by state policies designed to help it function. These policies were: (a) the development of an unprecedented military offensive in indigenous territories, with the purpose of “releasing” them from those who held them—and this meant releasing the territory from occupation, releasing the labor force from its ties to the dynamics of the indigenous economies; (b) the creation of an infrastructure to support an extensive incorporation of the territory into overseas markets (geoeconomically related railways, ports, stockpiling centers, etc.); and (c) an immigration policy affecting emptied lands, which both re-occupied them with social subjects functional to their production value, and increased the rent value.

This project constructed an image of the uncontrolled territory, by describing it as a “desert.” Several authors have pointed out the importance of this metaphor. According to Rinesi, “the desert is the unequivocal and perfect metaphor—but also the empirical, factual, material verification, the very evidence, we can say, of what Hobbes called ‘the state of nature’ in his *Leviathan*: the place of nothing, silence and death. It was in this state of nature that the Liberal state erected its founding project” (Rinesi, 1997, p 96).

From a historical and anthropological viewpoint, the allusions to territorial spaces on which the Argentine bourgeoisie designed its dominion and valuation model were not anchored only to a geographic, but also to a socio-cultural, metaphor. The state-national project had to empty these spaces of any ethnic or local claim, so that none of these “othernesses” should come between the institutions of the state and its “citizens” (Trincherro, 2000).

Critical knowledge of recent Argentine anthropologies and historiographies should include an understanding of the negative sense of the characterization attributed to the Argentine indigenous peoples on the basis of “Civilization” and “Barbarism” codes; I will not refer to it now. However, I emphasize the fact that the configuration of the national project as a war against barbarians changed from pointing out the provincial “caudillos” as the enemies to the Indians (those savages turned into barbarians). This happened after the crystallization of “pre-existing pacts” in the Constitution of 1853. That is, the *Leviathan* had been erected since Rosas' time, in order to sustain the territorial dominion agreements with local oligarchies in Buenos Aires and the interior provinces. With the swift transformation of a political economy eager for new and still uncontrolled

territories (the National Territories which covered more than 50 percent of the country's surface), the "civilizing" project shifted to the indigenous populations who lived there.

The political centrality of the national army

In this project, the national army, already unified, started to play a dominant role in the construction of an idea of sovereignty. This idea posited that it was necessary to expand internal frontiers into indigenous territories, in order to build up the nation. The military corporation founded its power upon the political economy, although it said that power was simultaneously supported by the symbolic and institutional delegation model with which political leaders legitimized their expansion. Thus, while the intellectuals who emerged from the political pact presented Buenos Aires as the scene of a booming urban and civilized modernity, they delegated the conquest of interior frontiers to the military corporation and introduced race war inward as its pathetic hologram.

There was an unprecedented increase in the budget intended to support the military. In 1863, military expenses amounted to more than half the national budget (Trincheró, 1992). This increase occurred along with a professionalization process: commands were unified, recruits were paid a salary, armament was improved, and the internal organization was developed as in no other governmental agency, leading to the creation of the Military School in 1869, the Navy School in 1872, and a body of military engineers. Its functions were vital to the construction of a rationalization model to be applied to its own structure and to the "spaces" to be controlled.

The National Territories became the subject of geopolitical utopias of the newly formed modernity, and so were transferred to the military corporation as if they were a theater of operations. Topographic surveys and the mapping of the space where the action would take place acquired a vital importance. In 1884, the Military Topographic Office was incorporated into the "military engineers" section of the Armed Forces General Staff. They gradually acquired new duties, including mapmaking tasks, geodesics, topography, filing, inspection and surveys of military interest, until, in 1904, the Military Geographic Institute was created. Military engineers would also play a central role in the construction of bridges, roads, railways, etc., which would carry "civilization" into the vast territories. The tasks of reconnaissance, exploration, systematization, and representation of the territory were the means by which the army centralized its power.

But the military corporation's power expansion process not only increased its own budget so it could develop and dominate; it also raised its members' expectation of assets increases. Appropriated territory became war plunder. The "campaigns to the desert" also enriched the military corporation itself, since the state rewarded officers, from frontier and regiment commanders to reservists, with important territorial concessions.

Land was allocated according to rank, as follows: Frontier Commander, 8000 has., Regiment Commander, 5000 has., Sergeant Major, 4000 has., Captains and Senior Aides-de-Camp, 2500 has., First and Second Lieutenants, 2000 has., other officers, 1500 has. Land thus served to motivate army members to implement military campaigns. It is revealing to note that the titles to conquered lands were quoted on the London Stock Exchange immediately after the planning of any campaign became known (Novick, 1992, pp 40–41).⁶

The capital Buenos Aires required infrastructure—railways, roads, etc.—in order to bring tannin, sugar, cotton, and other materials from the interior provinces to its port. These systems had to be protected from indigenous people’s “belligerence,” and the demand in the regional capital in the Argentine North for massive short-term labor legitimized centralization, although with different degrees of acceptance by the political class. The centrality of the army in the construction of the state depended on the acceptance, by the political class and organic intellectuals, of discourse positing the indigenous populations’ belligerence and inability to “peacefully” submit to order and progress.

A coordinated war strategy was legitimized only at the ideological level, although it mainly responded to the interests of the military corporation itself. It was a project of economic reproduction which, through the conquest of territories, enriched corporation members. Officers supported deepening reproduction they became increasingly “aristocratized” (Trincherro, 2000, pp 132–140). Military intervention ordering extermination of the “indigenous enemy” had its test during the occupation of the vast Pampean and Patagonian extensions, but it was reproduced in Chaco (the “green desert”), even though the commanders’ speeches, which aimed to legitimize the army’s position for governmental authorities and businessmen in the region, insisted on the incorporation of indigenous peoples in production.⁷

Following the footprints of the indigenous genocide

Argentine post neo-colonial modernity started with a massacre, in which thousands of natives belonging to the original peoples were exterminated, confined, imprisoned, and redistributed by the “glorious” unified army. Military records, which may be consulted in relation to the period prior to Caseros,⁸ show that an accounting was kept of the ethnocide the hegemonic power carried out. A document written by Rosas himself after an extermination campaign to the region of Colorado river reads as follows: “. . . Over one thousand people died in the year 1836 alone (...), one more effort and the great purposes and invaluable assets of such happy campaign shall be attained.”⁹

Conversely, in order to justify the renewal of race war, in the ethnocide carried out against the indigenous populations in the Pampean–Patagonian and Chaco regions the warlike aptitude of the adversary was inflated, whereas the losses caused by the army were played down. Thus, for instance, General Urriburu,¹⁰ referring to Chaco natives, stated that “there would be 80,000 souls among the

different tribes living between the Salado and the Bermejo rivers; this would mean around 10,000 armed men . . .”¹¹

In the battle of Pavón in September of 1861, General Mitre, commander of the Buenos Aires army, defeated the Confederation army led by Urquiza. This consolidated the hegemony of Buenos Aires over the provincial “caudillos.” From that moment onwards, the military corporation took on a multiple and hegemonic role in the construction of stateness at the frontier. In fact, beyond partial defeats and long-standing missionary processes, native populations had developed important negotiation experiences and defensive tactics that the new elites were not eager to acknowledge. Instead, in delegating to the army an offensive war of conquest, the elites obsessively sought a so-called “final solution” to the “indigenous question.”

It has already been pointed out that the military corporation applied the conquest model in Chaco to replicate the Pampean–Patagonian desert campaigns. However, by 1870, this second mode of territorial conquest intensified in its the extent and repetition; and it concluded in 1911. A chronology of the first stage of the intervention follows:

- 1870. Campaign led by Lieutenant Colonel Napoleón Urriburu from Jujuy up to Corrientes through Chaco along Bermejo River.
- 1879. Campaign led by Colonel Manuel Obligado to the Southern Chaco, making a circle at the north of the province of Santa Fe with the explicit purpose of suppressing raids by natives who had attacked the provinces of Córdoba and Santiago del Estero.
- 1880. Campaign led by Major Luis Jorge Fontana through the Southern Chaco from Resistencia up to the current Department of Rivadavia in the province of Salta.
- 1881. Campaign led by Commander Juan Solá from Fort Dragones in Salta up to Formosa.
- 1883. Campaign led by R. Obligado. Divided into three columns, it carried out a “rake-type” operation throughout the northern part of the province of Santa Fe. One of them, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel J. M. Urriburu, commander of Cavalry Regiment No 12, departed from Chilcas with 150 armed men to the north. Lieutenant Colonel J.M. Ferreyra simultaneously departed from Fort Inca to the Salado River. Finally, 100 men led by Obligado himself departed from Reconquista to the north with the purpose of joining the troops of Bosch. They failed in their attempt, diverted to the west to the so-called Fort Encrucijada, joined Urriburu to the south in Tacurá, and returned after about 70 days to the city of Resistencia.
- 1883. Campaign led by Bosch. With a main column under his direct orders and a secondary column, he deployed his troops in coordination with Obligado. He departed from Resistencia with 320 combat men, clashing with the followers of the Toba chief known by the nickname of “The Englishman,” in the locality of Mala Mahue. He pursued the natives up to Napalpí, where a generalized killing occurred. In Guayabí he rejected a resistance attempt by some Toba groups. He

returned to the city of Resistencia after having covered some 200 square leagues.

- 1883. At the same time and from the other end of the frontier with “the Indians,” Izabeta’s expedition departed. One hundred and fifty men departed from Fort Dragones to the frontier with Bolivia. He made a circular journey, causing many casualties among the Mataco-Wichí, Toba and mainly Chiriguano groups. His campaign lasted approximately 80 days.

Apart from this unprecedented military deployment at the northern frontier, the first campaigns, which were meant to be of an offensive nature—that is, to increase the state’s territorial control—did not achieve their purpose. After completing them, the forts, sparsely equipped and erected along a vast territory, did not generate control of the territory or discipline native populations. After these “punitive” raids against the indigenous groups, military settlements, sometimes abandoned and lacking communication, were a relatively easy prey to the indigenous resistance.

Those at commanding headquarters were obsessed with the problem of fort settlement as a way for the territorial control project to succeed. Except in those frontier regions nearer to the provincial control, or in places where military headquarters, reservations, and prisons were consolidated, most forts could not offer much resistance to the indigenous groups, who perceived them as part of a systematic occupation of their territories.

The utopia of “space” control in such a vast territory had its hackneyed expression in those small advance forts. However, the military authorities delegated the survival of those “civilization enclaves” to a provisioning which depended to a great extent on the pacts made with natives. Thus, merchants, traders of Indians, official lenders, and soldiers created a complex framework of complicities and clientelism at the forts, which constituted the true “civilization in the desert” (Rosenzvaig, 1995, p 178).

The provisioning, indeed life in the forts itself, depended on a multiplicity of forms of corruption which were “legitimized,” at least in the discourse of frontier men, by the adverse conditions of “the life in the desert.” Sectors of indigenous populations—those who had developed the capacity for mobility through the use of horses and who participated in cattle trade—in many cases also considered these detachments as integral to commerce. In fact, most attacks on the forts seem to have been due more to a lack of compliance with commercial agreements or non-incursion pacts against specific territories, than to elaborate strategies of attack against established positions.

The circle of violence, then, gradually closed. The forts, sparsely provisioned, resorted to all forms of agreements and negotiations in order to survive. Indigenous groups imposed their conditions, mainly non-aggression agreements, which seemed to hold the possibility that a relatively “peaceful coexistence” could be maintained. However, commanders breached these informal agreements, by sending orders to the national army to move and occupy new lands. Therefore, the new detachments were sometimes attacked, by the indigenous groups or their

allies, who felt they had been betrayed and deceived. In turn, the unified army command planned and justified new campaigns against the “indomitable Indian.”

When campaigns undertaken before 1883 are analyzed, reference is made to their ineffectiveness, using phrases such as the “minimal training of the troops,” the “few operating means available,” and the “dependence on the boldness of commanders and troops.” These positive affirmations tend to legitimize the offensive war model which succeeded them immediately afterwards,¹² a model which began by controlling an already occupied, “civilized” territory defended by a frontier of dispersed forts, and refocused to an offensive strategy. The movement away from a war of fixed positions, in which a system of forts establishes military frontiers, to a war of systematic, rapid, coordinated expulsion carried out by a centralized command in which communications play an important role by concentrating, not dispersing forces: this is the Prussian model (Rosenzvaig, 1995, p 179).

This hegemonic strategy model of the unified national army was first applied at the frontier with Chaco in the campaigns started in 1883, and had its ultimate expression in the campaigns led by General Victorica one year later. The military objective, formulated by the national government and undertaken by Victorica, was to push the frontier with the Indians up to the Bermejo River, for which purpose he organized the following military movements with over 800 men:

- (1) On September 29, 145 armed men departed from Resistencia to occupy Fort Bosch, by the Bermejo River, after having covered 70 km.
- (2) The general commanders, a few days later with 110 men, departed from Bermejo Port, passed by Fort Bosch, arrived at Confluencia and then went on to La Cangayé. They covered 320 km.
- (3) On October 9, Lieutenant Colonel J. M. Uriburu started his campaign from Cocherek with 260 men, arrived at La Cangayé, combing different areas between Bermejo and Salado rivers, and returned to La Cangayé after a 40-day campaign.
- (4) On October 15, Colonel Ignacio Fotheringham started from Formosa with 100 men. They covered the northern bank of the Bermejo River, reached Teuco River and settled on November 2 near La Cangayé, after having covered 320 km.
- (5) On October 26, Lieutenant Colonel Luis Jorge Fontana departed from Formosa under Fotheringham’s command, covering the areas next to central Chaco and joining the central column settled by the Teuco River.
- (6) On October 30, Lieutenant Colonel Rudecindo Ibazeta departed with two columns and a total of 180 men from Fort Victorica. They traveled along both banks of the Bermejo River, and arrived at La Cangayé.
- (7) After such military deployment during which a large number of natives died and no less than 5,000 indigenous people from different groups were “reduced,” the Marine Major Valentin Feilberg sailed the Pilcomayo River up to the frontier with Bolivia. At the same time, Marine Colonel Ceferino Ramírez sailed up the Bermejo River to La Cangayé.

The absence of armed clashes is reflected even in the general order dated November 8 signed by Victorica himself when he arrived at La Cangayé, the campaign strategic spot:

Our camp in the thick woods of Cangayé shows the success of the first day of campaign which will result in the eradication of barbarism from the rich territories of Chaco, which was an unjustifiable affront to leave them to the horrors of the desert and the savage ... If the savage has fled, if nature has favored the venture, its merits are not decreased. (Victorica, 1884, p 1)

In general, the indigenous groups withdrew to the woods due to the presence of military forces, and only occasionally offered a little resistance, which the commanders considered to be large battles. Northern sugar industrial capitals already required indigenous peoples; therefore their extermination was against the interests of this emerging sector. Even so, the army, turned into an employment agency and an accumulation model as well, asserted the need to continue its mission. They hoped this rhetoric would “frighten” the political class in Buenos Aires, who had already started to seduce Europe and was not willing to show hidden flaws.

To state numbers of deaths is always a distressing and even horrifying task, generally because such figures try to clarify what is hidden, and many times they become an act of concealment. However, in this case, I think that figures may be an act of memory in view of the oblivion of “origins.” These figures have been disseminated, fragmented, partially hidden, in difficult-to-access military files. According to a recent study that tries to systematize the official information still extant in the files, the figures are as follows: between 1821 and 1852, 7,587 Indians were massacred, and between 1878 and 1884, 3,133 (adding up the figures of Roca’s campaign¹³ in the south and Uriburu, Victorica and others in Chaco). That is, an officially recognized total of 10,600 natives were exterminated.¹⁴ Regarding the army’s casualties, the figures are rounded off at 1,000 during Rosas’ campaigns; that is, the army for the whole “process” records 2,000 casualties. However, the latter figures show another reality: from those 2,000 casualties, only 358 were soldiers; the rest were natives, those who the army recruited to fight on the fronts, who died participating in army-organized raids and counter-raids. Obviously, to record such casualties as belonging to the army is an obfuscation for the purpose of inflating the number of official casualties.

Let us return to this question: how can the state construct an effective discourse about a war directed at its own population groups? At least in the Argentine case, one of the keys lies in the capitalist state’s ability to define social subjects as foreigners. This leads to the next question: how can the state turn native people into foreign subjects? The key here lies with the movement of the capitalist political economy, which, in our country, always intends to be a new founder. It imposes a new model after each accumulation crisis, and then sets itself up as a novel creator of a new model of nation.

These changes imply a contradictory reality, the creation of new legitimate subjects on the one hand, and, on the other, subjects who do not belong to the new nation. Thus, when the so-called “final solution” to the indigenous question was imposed to make effective the integration of the national production into the world market, it was the immigrant who was praised for his production capacities. However, large contingents of immigrants became proletarians in large cities, after first becoming a surplus population, unfit to be “colonists” within an agricultural structure. This caused the model to succumb to nationalism.

The “gaucho,” who had also been pushed out and eliminated from the agricultural structure, became a national icon in literature and in the nationalist intellectuals’ movements, and his foreignness played a role in legitimizing discourse. Speeches and practices were aimed at attaching negative attributes to the immigrants, while the state and paramilitary groups carried out repressive actions against emerging social protest movements. In the same way, the genocide committed in the seventies by the previous military dictatorship was aimed at eliminating the individuals who resisted a compulsory process of integration into a world market which reordered the native economy in line with so-called “globalization.”

Today, the national democratic state has echoed and created a set of institutional devices and legal and political provisions aimed at recognizing the rights of indigenous peoples. However, such devices and provisions are only a formal superstructure, without any connection to the actual demands of these populations. A specific case is that of territorial claims. This topic is central to native peoples’ historical demands, and without discussing it in depth, we can still say that their property rights regarding the territories under the amended constitution have not been recognized.

Although original rural populations occupy “borders,” imageries and political practices generate no territorial negotiation devices in accordance with the rules in force. In these cases, the specter of secession and of alleged extra-national obscure interests, etc., appear once again. This contradiction, between infringed rights and concrete practice, gives rise to a paradoxical situation. Impoverished rural inhabitants increasingly assume their ethnic identities and join indigenous organizations in the hope of obtaining the possession of the land they occupy, while the state does not implement the necessary mechanisms to reach an agreement.

The solution of the conflict gets more and more complicated, but at the same time it raises the question of the Argentine identity formation. What survives in the political imagery is the extremely inequitable distribution of land, Argentina being almost the only country in Latin America that has never considered the possibility of agrarian reform. The society avoids considering this situation because of an agrarian political economic model which depends totally on the world food market. This situation becomes still worse with the current soya boom (Teubal, 2004).

As we have said above, when a territorial conflict arises on the scene, the state reconfigures images of the indigenous populations, turning them from “native brethren” to aliens dominated by foreign interests. It may be observed that the

“indigenist” discourse, which has paternalist roots, recognizes the existence of native populations provided they do not appear as collective subjects or fight for their historical interests. Even the “exotization” of these peoples by certain hegemonic anthropology contributed to produce images of archaism and foreignness, so that common sense dictated keeping native peoples at a distance: “The Mapuches are not Argentinean, they are Chilean; the Wichis and Kollas are Bolivians; the Guaranies are Paraguayan,” etc.

To illustrate the impact of war and the way it constructs hegemony (using this term in keeping with R. Williams’ interpretation rather than Gramsci’s), I would like to make a brief mention of a field experience in the Wichi communities of the Chaco region in the province of Salta.¹⁵ As I have pointed out on other occasions, the conflict related to this territory led the government of Salta to enact a “property ownership regularization” law at the end of the 1980s (Trincherro *et al.*, 1992). This law and its regulation, however, have not been implemented to date. Conflict arose as expected, when the provincial government itself designed and constructed a road, through the Chaco region on a provincial stretch of the international route. Wichí, Chorote, and Chulupí peoples’ organizations had been claiming and negotiating with the government to turn over the land they occupy. Because they had not been consulted about the plotting of this route and the construction of a transfrontier bridge, they organized a protest by blocking the road and “taking” a bridge, in which all the communities of the region participated (La Paz Mission-Argentina/Pozo Hondo-Paraguay). The protest lasted more than one month, and elicited repressive actions by the Frontier Guard and negotiations by indigenous leaders with provincial authorities.

A brief description of an event indicates the nature of the extermination war lived by native peoples. D., the now-deceased main leader of the affected communities, often enjoyed consensus and political authority. After a struggle that weakened him, he reached certain agreements with the authorities. Some colleagues and I participated in an inter-community meeting where the situation was commented on and analyzed. The youngest members of the community, seeing no clear, public support from the governor, had ample reasons not to trust the pacts. I remember that in the middle of the protest and negotiations, D. burst into tears, as the youngest leaders sharply questioned what they interpreted as his weak attitude towards the government.

Few had ever seen him in such a state of mind, and so a deep silence ensued, which lasted seconds but seemed an eternity. Then somebody dared to ask him, in a less aggressive way, the reasons he made that agreement. Partially recovered, D. tried to give an answer which, according to my records, was as follows: “Brothers . . . my heart is aching . . . when I see these military men in our communities, I fear for you . . . not for me, because I am old . . . I fear for my children and my brothers . . . that they may suffer the same thing as the ancients. *I know that if we move too much, they will think again that we want to wage war on them . . .*”

Native peoples have internalized the memory of war in their consciousness as a state policy against them. This shows the distance still existing between

legal recognition, and the “historical reparation” to which the legislation refers. Clearly, this gap functions to maintain a status quo in which the indigenous peoples are not considered as members of a new constitutional pact.

Notes and References

- 1 Original title in Spanish: El genocidio de los pueblos indígenas en la formación del estado-nación argentino.
- 2 Perhaps this distinction may seem today quite senseless when we understand that current imperialism conceives the world as its “backyard.” Even so, in the light of the genealogy of Latin American social formations, in my opinion this distinction retains certain analytical capacity.
- 3 The Argentine nationalism of a hegemonic nature has been, first and foremost, the emergence of a process of legitimization of persecution and, in many cases, of massacres of the immigrant population, once the latter became the resistant class against the economy of exploitation of its workforce (very far from the ideal of the Colonist, imagined by the organic intellectuals of the generation of the 1980s). Its multiple expression covers from legal aspects (Law of Residence) to the formation of paramilitary groups such as the feared Patriotic League in 1919, to the emergence of a “gaucho” literature represented, among others, by Leopoldo Lugones, Rojas, and Gálvez.
- 4 These racist ideas were developed by Sarmiento in his classic book *Facundo, civilization or barbarism* and also in *Harmonies and conflicts of race in America* (op cit), two texts which cover the political imagery of dominant classes in Latin America, promoting the idea of an Argentine political project clearly differentiated from other Latin American countries.
- 5 Land rent increase in England was related to the expansion of land occupation increasingly less apt for food production (Ricardo’ thesis). The limit imposed by this expansion to the maintenance of low salaries favorably conditioned the expansion of hinterlands such as the Argentine one, where land rent was lower and could be absorbed thanks to the decreases in meat and wheat prices. This “political economy” movement was centered around the capitalist valuation of the territory and its population in a double process which implied the generation of the conditions for territorial control, that is, a domination of the space productively conceived according to said interests, generating the conditions to obtain a differential rent and, at the same time, a valuation of the workforce, although on some occasions expressed as opposite bourgeois interests.
- 6 This policy of rewards did not turn officers into owners living off the income from their property. Quite to the contrary, most of them sold their titles at very low prices. In his diary published in 1838, a member of the conquering army showed his disappointment with the reward given to him by the authorities: “It is true that they paid us a salary, I don’t remember if it amounted to six pesos per month, and that later they gave us lands, but since years elapsed and we did not know where or when we would be assigned, those who were tired of waiting sold their shares and interests at 20 cents per hectare; I preferred to speculate and waited until the value of those lands increased, and earned a packet by selling at 50 cents the 1,600 hectares the country had given me; and when everybody had sold their share, we delivered the fields measured and with boundaries marked to the purchasers” (Pechmann, 1980, p 81).
- 7 “In the space of 33 years (1862–1895) the main indigenous leaders were annihilated in three ways: death in combat, execution, and surrender or submission” (Sarasola, op cit 527).
- 8 In the locality of Caseros, General Urquiza defeated Rosas (February 3, 1852), giving rise to a process of reorganization of the National state.
- 9 In M. Mabrugaña, *Los Mensajes* (“The Messages”), 1810–1839, Vol I, p 234, CGE, Vol IV, pp 363. s/f.
- 10 Lieutenant Colonel Uriburu participated in campaigns against the natives in Chaco in 1870 and later in 1883.
- 11 In A. Seelstrang, Informe de la comisión exploradora del Chaco (“Report by the reconnaissance commission to Chaco”). (Buenos Aires: Eudeba, 1977).
- 12 See for instance, the book by Félix Best, *Historia de las guerras argentinas* (“History of the Argentine wars”), op cit.
- 13 It was under the presidency of Nicolás Avellaneda that Julio A. Roca, in 1879, as Minister of War and Navy, started the most important military offensive against the indigenous populations in the Pampean and Patagonian regions, known as the “campaign to the desert.”
- 14 This book is *Nuestros paisanos los indios* (“Our compatriots, the Indians”) by Carlos Martínez Sarasola, op cit, an exemplary and essential text for the systematic and critical treatment of these issues, consigned into oblivion by historiography.
- 15 Raymond Williams wrote in this regard: “. . . Hegemony is neither the articulated superior level of ‘ideology’ nor its forms of control usually considered as ‘manipulation’ or ‘indoctrination.’ Hegemony is a whole set of practices and expectations in relation to the totality of life: our senses and doses of energy, the defined perceptions we have about ourselves and our world” (1980, p 131).

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