

Decolonial Responses to the Conquest of the Desert

Challenging Official Justifications

Manuel Serrano,
Institute for Research in Human and Social Sciences (IIHS-UNSL),
National University of San Luis - CONICET, Argentina

Abstract: *This paper offers a decolonial critique of the official justifications for the Conquest of the Desert (1878–1885), through which the Argentine state violently occupied Indigenous territories in the Pampas and Patagonia. Applying a hermeneutics of suspicion, it examines legal acts, state correspondence, and academic discourse to uncover the ideological foundations of the civilising and defensive narratives. The analysis shows that these justifications were rooted not in legitimate self-defence but in colonial and racialised assumptions that dehumanised Indigenous peoples and excluded them from legal protection. The study argues that the violence was a structural manifestation of a colonial order, masquerading as national progress. By exposing these ideological underpinnings, the paper challenges dominant historical narratives and calls for a critical rethinking of the Conquest’s legacy.*

Keywords: Conquest of the Desert, Historical Injustices, Indigenous People, Coloniality of Power.

1. Introduction

The history of the Americas is marked by injustices perpetrated against various groups, with Indigenous peoples being a particularly pertinent example. From the arrival of Columbus onwards, Indigenous populations suffered violence, exploitation, and the appropriation of their resources. These injustices persisted after the independence of American nations and continue to the present day.

A stark illustration of this violence is the ‘Conquest of the Desert’ in Argentina (1878-1885), a series of military campaigns to extend the Argentine state’s control over the Pampean and Patagonian territories. This region was home to diverse Indigenous communities. The campaigns resulted in the incorporation of over 60 million hectares into Argentina, but at a devastating human cost. Thousands of Indigenous people were killed; survivors were often forcibly separated from their families and interned in concentration camps known as *reducciones*, where they endured harsh conditions and forced labour on agricultural estates. Women were subjected to sexual violence, and children were forcibly removed from their communities, baptised, and placed with non-Indigenous families with the aim of ‘civilising’ them (Del Rio et al., 2010; Bandieri, 2000; Martínez Sarasola, 1998: 143–148, 2011: 295-311, and Bustos-Videla, 1964: 44–56).

The Conquest of the Desert has been subject to various justifications intended to minimise or deny its inherent injustice. A dominant narrative has emerged, which rationalises the Argentine state's territorial expansion and thus negates the experience of indigenous suffering (Barreiro et al., 2017). This narrative persists in contemporary social, political, and educational discourse.

This paper argues that the justifications for the Conquest of the Desert are rooted in ideological and cultural prejudices stemming from the coloniality of power. To demonstrate this, I will examine two key justifications: the idea of civilisation and progress to 'civilise' Indigenous peoples, and the defence of Argentine frontiers. I will then demonstrate that these prejudices lack validity, even within the historical context of the 19th century.

2. Methodology

This paper adopts a hermeneutics of suspicion to uncover the ideological assumptions underlying the official discourse surrounding the Conquest of the Desert. This approach pays particular attention to traditions that have been marginalised or silenced within the broader Western canon (Sousa Santos, 2018: 304). It will be applied to a range of official sources, including legal documents authorising the military expansion into Pampean and Patagonian territories, as well as correspondence between political and military leaders. Additionally, academic works both preceding and following the Conquest will serve as important sources for this analysis. It is important to note that this is not a work of historiography or ethnography; rather, it is a piece of decolonial philosophy. The aim is to reconstruct the official justification for the Conquest and to show, through a hermeneutics of suspicion, the deeply rooted ideological and cultural prejudices.

3. The Discourse of Justification

In 1878, the Argentine government employed two distinct arguments to legitimise its expansion into Patagonia: an ideological narrative centred on civilisation and progress, with the goal of 'civilising' Indigenous peoples, and strategic military concerns related to frontier security and the prevention of warfare.

3.1. Civilisation and Progress

A central justification for the Conquest of the Desert rested on the assertion of an ontological difference between the Argentine population and Indigenous communities. The Argentine government portrayed its citizens as representatives of a civilised culture, rational actors contributing to human progress. Conversely, Indigenous peoples were depicted as belonging to earlier stages of human evolution, embodying a barbaric culture and lacking rationality. This perspective reflected the prevailing positivist discourse of the era, which emphasised concepts of progress and barbarism (Viñas, 2021).

This conception was predicated on the idea of Argentine culture as a descendant of European civilisation. Europe was viewed as the pinnacle of civilisation, and its colonisation of the Americas was interpreted as a progressive endeavour. This narrative continued with the American revolutions, framed as a chapter of the Enlightenment, where liberty and reason were central ideals. Consequently, many scholars interpret the Conquest of the Desert as a continuation of the 16th-century

Spanish conquest and the subsequent Argentine independence period (1810-1816)¹ (Torres, 2011: 15).

The civilisation/barbarism dichotomy is evident in various academic works predating and postdating the Conquest, as well as in official documents, correspondence between military and political leaders, and legal acts. For example, Act 947, which authorised the military campaigns, mandated the subjugation or expulsion of the 'barbarian Indians of La Pampa, from the V and Diamante Rivers to the Negro and Neuquén Rivers' (Section 1)².

Before the campaigns, Manuel Olascoaga wrote a study about the possibility and importance of the Patagonian territories for Argentina. In this work, he said:

The desert makes Indians, and it is indispensable to suppress the former so that the latter can be eliminated. The quickest and most effective way to suppress the desert is to enter it decisively with the population, just as it has been entered with the military columns. (Olascoaga, 1881: 202-203)

During the 20th century, some academic journals published papers discussing the Conquest of the Desert as a war against the 'barbarian Indians', akin to the challenges the Spanish faced during colonial times.³ Similarly, they emphasised the significance of expanding Argentine culture and advancing progress into the Pampean and Patagonian territories.⁴ In this sense, Juan Carlos Walther published '*La Conquista del Desierto*' (The Conquest of the Desert),⁵ in which he established a relationship between the colonial conquest (1527-1810) and the Conquest of the Desert. In the prologue of the 3rd edition, he said:

The Conquest of the Desert was not an indiscriminate or merciless action against the aboriginal Indians of our pampas ... On the contrary, the Conquest of the Desert was carried out against the rebellious Indian, reluctant to the repeated and generous offers of the authorities, eager to incorporate him into civilised life so that as such he could live together with the other settlers, peacefully, and thus stop being barbarian and savage, assimilating himself to the uses and customs of the other Argentines. (Walther, 1980: 11)

A key justification for this ontological distinction —and consequently for the Conquest itself— was the indigenous practice of [*malones*] (raids), which involved violent incursions into Argentine territory, resulting in the theft of livestock, weapons, and even the kidnapping of women and children. These raids particularly affected rural communities near the frontier, which sought government protection

¹ A clear example of this was the book '*Facundo o civilización y barbarie en las pampas argentinas*' (1845) written by Domingo Faustino Sarmiento, an important political actor of the Argentine. In his book, Sarmiento makes a dichotomy between the civilisation — represented by the European culture and his descendant in Argentina— and barbarians. The barbarians were represented by Indigenous people and mestizos. Specifically, Sarmiento used the figure of the caudillo Facundo Quiroga as a symbol of the perceived barbarism of the interior provinces.

² Available at: <https://apym.hcdn.gob.ar/sesiones/leyes/leyes-de-1876-1877-1878-1879/1774>. See pages 366-369.

³ See Del Viso 1933.

⁴ See Velez 1934.

⁵ The original title was '*La Conquista del Desierto. Síntesis histórica de los principales sucesos ocurridos y operaciones militares realizadas en La Pampa y Patagonia, contra los indios (años 1527 -1885)*' (The Conquest of the Desert. Historical synthesis of the main events and military operations carried out in La Pampa and Patagonia against the Indians (years 1527 -1885)).

and assistance. These events understandably created tension between some Indigenous tribes and the Argentine government.

However, the relationship between Argentina and Indigenous communities was not consistently one of conflict. Evidence suggests that various forms of exchange, including trade, were common on the frontier, often formalised through peace treaties (Ratto, 1994, Bandieri, 2000, and Pérez Zavala, 2014). Similar practices had existed between the Spanish Crown and various Indigenous groups. Nevertheless, the 1878 Argentine government and proponents of the Conquest often dismissed these treaties as deceptive tactics employed by Indigenous groups to gain temporary advantages, such as military protection and livestock, only to resume their *malones* at the first opportunity. This perception contributed to the belief that military conquest was the only viable solution⁶.

If Argentine society represented civilisation and rationality, while the Indigenous peoples were portrayed as barbaric and irrational, then it was deemed the state's duty to 'civilise' them to achieve human progress. This ideological framework was reflected in the legal system of the time. In its early stages, the Argentine legal system maintained pacific traits with the Indigenous people, but it always seemed they were treated as inferior. For example, the Argentine National Constitution of 1860 said: 'It corresponds to the Congress: ... To provide for the security of the frontiers; to preserve the peaceful treatment of the Indians and to promote their conversion to Catholicism.' (Section 67). The Acts that authorised the military campaigns against the Indigenous people in Patagonia were 215 (1867) and 947 (1878). These Acts established differing treatment for tribes: those who submitted peacefully to the Argentine government were offered peace treaties and provisions for their peaceful subsistence. Rebellious tribes, conversely, would be forcibly removed to the outskirts of the Argentine borders.

This so-called 'peaceful submission' was, in practice, coercive. Indigenous groups were not free to negotiate the terms of peace treaties but were instead compelled to comply with the state's demands. Acts of subjugation were described in terms of submission or conquest. Indigenous people faced a binary choice: either accept the Argentine state's terms or resist and face military annihilation. This coercion was exemplified by the incursion led by Lieutenant Uriburu, who attacked the tribe of Chief Purrán without receiving a response to a previously made peace offer. Despite violating government orders, Uriburu's actions were not condemned but celebrated by the government and many academics defending the Conquest, who viewed such actions as heroic and vital for national progress⁷.

The Indigenous people who were subjugated suffered a systematic violation of their dignity. They were separated from their families and taken to concentration camps (*reducciones*). In these camps, they were deprived of their freedom and compelled to perform government-approved activities, typically restricted to subsistence living and practising Catholic rites. The remaining Indigenous people were coerced into working in harsh conditions on various agricultural and livestock farms, often situated far from their ancestral lands. Indigenous women were subjected to rape to further the government's agenda of racial mixing. Non-Indigenous men raped Indigenous women as a means to suppress indigenous reproduction. The Indigenous children, after being baptised, were handed over to

⁶ See, for example Del Viso (1933) and Walther (1980).

⁷ For example, see Walther (1980: 470-479) and Curruhuinca and Roux (1993: 150-157). While Juan Carlos Walther represents the hegemonic perspective on the Conquest of the Desert, Curapil Curruhuinca and Luis Roux present the indigenous perspective. Notably, they show how the government justified—and even portrayed as heroic—Uriburu's attack on the tribe led by Chief Purrán.

non-Indigenous families to be ‘civilised’ (Delrio et al., 2010). In short, the Conquest of the Desert meant that thousands of Indigenous people were killed, captured, and expelled from the new frontiers of Argentina (Bandieri, 2000; Martínez Sarasola, 1998, pp. 143–148, and 2011, pp. 295–311).

These atrocities were justified by dehumanising Indigenous peoples, often comparing them to animals. The state did not consider the possibility of their integration into Argentine culture on their own terms but instead imposed a rigid expectation: to accept their role as labourers without rights. This perception underpinned the violence against Indigenous peoples. Their supposed inability to adapt to ‘civilised life’ was used to justify their subjugation and the state’s relentless drive to ‘civilise’ them. The Enlightenment ideals were selectively applied, with liberty often restricted to the ‘civilised’ (Castro Gómez, 1993).

3.2. A Frontiers Problem

Another justification for advancing over Patagonia was the issue of territorial rights. The Argentine government had a significant interest in securing its frontiers, both against Indigenous tribes and with the Republic of Chile. During the ‘May Revolution’ (1810) and the country’s subsequent independence from Spain (1816), Indigenous tribes were invited to participate in the formation of the nation. Over time, the Argentine government and several provincial administrations signed treaties with these tribes to establish commercial networks and provide mutual military support. Notably, these treaties often included provisions obligating the tribes to defend the Argentine frontier against incursions by other tribes or foreign nations. Many Indigenous tribes recognised their presence within Argentine territories and their role in its defence (Bandieri, 2000). However, by 1878, the Argentine government no longer recognised these tribes as legitimate political actors within the Pampean and Patagonian regions⁸.

The ontological distinction between civilisation and barbarism, along with the justification of violence against Indigenous peoples, led to the perception that all Indigenous tribes were violent and prone to *malones* against Argentine cities. This perspective is evident in the draft of Act 947, particularly in the message sent to the Argentine Congress by President Nicolás Avellaneda and his Minister of War, Julio Argentino Roca. In this text, the government outlined its primary objective: to advance over the Pampean and Patagonian territories as far south as the Negro and Neuquén Rivers to secure the southern frontier. This objective rested on four main justifications⁹.

First, it involved a shift in the paradigm of territorial defence. Before the Conquest of the Desert, successive governments—including colonial authorities—had expanded through gradual occupation, marking territorial limits with a chain of military forts. According to Roca and Avellaneda, this strategy had proven ineffective, as soldiers stationed in these remote outposts endured prolonged deployments and frequent attacks from Indigenous groups. In contrast, the new plan envisioned a decisive military campaign that would reach natural geographic boundaries—specifically the Negro and Neuquén Rivers—which could serve as defensive barriers. This would eliminate the need for a permanent army presence in the region, thus allowing for a more efficient allocation of Argentina’s military and economic resources.

⁸ For a study on Argentine frontier policy toward Indigenous peoples, see Pérez Zavala (2014).

⁹ National Congress. 1879. Chamber of Deputies Journal of sessions, 4/10/1878.

Second, the economic potential of Patagonia played a central role in justifying the campaign. In their message to Congress, Avellaneda and Roca emphasised the strategic value of the Negro River not only as a defensive boundary but also as a means to reduce military expenditures. They portrayed Patagonia as a fertile and underutilised region, describing approximately fifty thousand square miles of land that could be made available for agriculture and plantation development. Initially, the draft consisted of only five sections. However, Congress added sixteen more sections, primarily addressing the financial aspects of the Conquest of the Desert. Funding for the military campaign was raised through public subscriptions on the lands to be conquered. Subscribers could choose either to reclaim their investments with interest or to gain ownership of the lands.

Third, the justification extended to the Indigenous population itself. Avellaneda and Roca argued that, within the region extending to the Negro and Neuquén Rivers, there were relatively few Indigenous inhabitants. They estimated the population to be around twenty thousand, including 1,800 to 2,000 individuals, whom they claimed were warriors. This diagnosis was presented as evidence that the military campaign would be both feasible and necessary. The government also introduced a distinction between 'aggressive' and 'peaceful' tribes. The former were said to inhabit the Pampean region, while the latter were located south of the Negro River. Thus, the campaign was framed as a targeted operation: it aimed to defeat the aggressive tribes and relocate them beyond the Negro River.

The fourth justification was geopolitical, centred on Argentina's frontier conflict with Chile. For the national government, the military occupation of Patagonia held vital political significance, as Chile had expressed growing interest in these contested territories. In response, Avellaneda and Roca emphasised the urgency of taking 'real possession' of Patagonia. As they stated to Congress:

The occupation of the Negro River offers in itself no difficulty, but before carrying it out it is necessary to dislodge the Indians from the desert to be conquered, so as not to leave a single enemy in the rear, by subduing them by persecution or by force, or by throwing them south of that barrier: this is the main difficulty. (National Congress, 1879)

The interconnection between the Indigenous population and Chile was made explicit in several of Roca's writings, who frequently referred to the 'Indian problem' and the strategic importance of advancing over Patagonia to secure the frontiers. Roca emphasised that Indigenous tribes traded stolen goods, particularly livestock, with Chile, framing this commerce as a justification for military action¹⁰. In other words, there was a belief that one of the factors contributing to this Indigenous behaviour was their self-identification as Chilean and their recognition of only the Chilean government as their sovereign authority. This narrative dominated Argentine historiography until the 1980s¹¹.

4. Disarming the discourse of justification

In the following sections, I will analyse each of the aforementioned justifications to demonstrate that they are rooted in ideological and cultural prejudices stemming from the coloniality of power.

¹⁰ For example, see the Roca's editorial column in the journal 'La República', published in 1876 (in Walther, 1980: 428-429).

¹¹ See Walther (1980) and Del Viso (1933)

4.1. Does the Defence Justify the Violence?

The justification for distinguishing between ‘civilised’ and ‘barbarian’ peoples as a pretext for territorial expansion or domination is widely condemned as morally repugnant, given its historical associations with racism and colonialism —both of which perpetuate profound injustices. Nevertheless, some might still attempt to defend or rationalise government violence against Indigenous populations.

The practices of the *malones* constituted a significant aspect of Argentine culture and history. Esteban Echeverría’s poem ‘*La cautiva*’ (The Woman Captive) (1837) is widely regarded as the first great work of Argentine literature, offering a poignant narrative of a married couple abducted by Indigenous peoples. Similarly, Ángel Della Valle’s painting ‘*La vuelta del malón*’ (The Return of the Malon) (1892) holds a celebrated status as the first genuinely Argentine piece of art, vividly depicting the violence and abduction of women by Indigenous groups¹². The Argentine advance over Indigenous territories was often justified as a response to Indigenous violence. During the Conquest of the Desert, the government sought to resolve the problem of the *malones*. However, this justification faces several challenges.

The first issue pertains to identifying responsibility for the *malones*. These violent practices were perpetrated by specific groups of Indigenous peoples, not by all Indigenous people. Nevertheless, the Argentine government held all Indigenous communities collectively responsible for the *malones*. If there were any justification for attacking Indigenous groups in defence of Argentine territories, it would only extend to the specific groups responsible for the attacks. In this sense, it was the Argentine government that had to justify the attack on the Indigenous communities, and this justification had to be based on the identification of the communities responsible for the previous *malones*.

As the Argentine government itself recognised, there were several Indigenous communities in the Pampaeen and Patagonian territories. For Avellaneda and Roca, the Pampas tribes were considered aggressive, whereas Patagonian tribes were regarded as peaceful. Nevertheless, the Conquest of the Desert advanced across the entire Patagonian region, targeting even those so-called ‘peaceful’ tribes. If the government’s objective were truly defensive, it would have restricted its military actions to the allegedly aggressive groups.

Distinguishing between culpable and innocent Indigenous groups was undoubtedly difficult, especially given the swift nature of Indigenous attacks, which often left victims unable to identify their assailants. Still, this difficulty does not justify indiscriminate retaliation. A military campaign cannot be legitimately grounded in vague beliefs about a community’s ‘aggressiveness’. It is perhaps for this reason that some government directives emphasised the need to subjugate Indigenous groups peacefully, resorting to violence only if they resisted. However, subsequent events reveal that such directives were often rhetorical. For instance, Lieutenant Uriburu attacked a community before receiving a response to a peace offer. His actions were nonetheless recognised, justified, and celebrated by the government. In other words, there was no real interest in recognising the responsible communities or even in negotiating a peace treaty. On the contrary, there was an intention of military subjugation of the Indigenous people.

¹² This cultural aspect did not extend beyond the violence preceding the Conquest of the Desert. A notable example is observed in the architectural landscape of the Pampaeen region post-Conquest. The newly erected public buildings exhibit distinct features, such as vertical elements, which emphasise their isolation amidst the predominantly flat Pampas landscape. Furthermore, there is a deliberate effort to underscore the divide between rural and urban grids (Furió, 2023).

The second issue concerns the legitimacy of violence against Indigenous captives in the context of war. It is crucial to distinguish between the two types of violence inflicted upon Indigenous peoples. Firstly, there is violence against enemy soldiers during attacks or in defence against their assaults, which, *prima facie*, may be considered legitimate as part of warfare. However, a different form of violence is perpetrated against Indigenous individuals captured by the Argentine army.

These captives suffer atrocities akin to those outlined in the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (Delrio et al., 2010). They endured physical and psychological injuries, confinement in concentration camps (*reducciones*), and enslavement in agricultural and livestock farms aimed at the destruction of their communities. Additionally, the separation of families to prevent the birth of Indigenous children and the forced baptism and assimilation of Indigenous children as slave labourers are prohibited actions carried out by the Argentine State¹³ (Serrano & Sanz Ferramola, 2024: 8-9).

The Argentine Revolutionary Process started in 1810 and was influenced by the French Revolution and the Enlightenment context. The ideas of liberty, property, and autonomy were fundamental in the discussions during this time. For example, in Argentina, slavery and torture have been prohibited since 1813 with the 'Assembly of the year XIII'. Later, the National Constitution (1860) grants significant importance to the principles of liberty, property, and equality of all citizens. Moreover, these rights were 'for all the men of the world who wish to inhabit the Argentine soil'. The National Constitution, in Section 20, explicitly recognised the equality between Argentine citizens and foreigners.

Even if Indigenous individuals were to be regarded as prisoners of war, constitutional principles would still apply. Moreover, there were a lot of international rules about the treatment of the prisoners and losers which Argentina did not respect: The Laws of War on Land (Oxford, 9 September 1880), Project of an International Declaration concerning the Laws and Customs of War (Brussels, 27 August 1874), later the Convention (IV) respecting the Laws and Customs of War on Land and its annexe: Regulations concerning the Laws and Customs of War on Land (The Hague, 18 October 1907). While Argentina was not a signatory to all these instruments, they reflect a shared international understanding of the basic rights owed to all human beings during war.

The contradiction between constitutional and international principles and the actions of the Argentine Acts regarding Indigenous treatment stems from deeply ingrained issues of racism, colonialism, and coloniality. In 1992, Anibal Quijano wrote '*Colonialidad y Modernidad/Racionalidad*' (Coloniality, Modernity/Rationality), a paper where he developed the idea of coloniality. First, for Quijano, colonialism is a form of direct political, social, and cultural domination. A clear example of colonialism was Spain, Portugal, and England's colonies in the Americas. Today, the political dimension has been defeated. During the 19th century, the different revolutions in the Americas established the independence and sovereignty of each country involved (Quijano, 1992: 11).

The colonial structure of power produced social discriminations that were later codified as 'racial', 'ethnic', 'anthropological', or 'national'. These discriminations were intersubjective constructions assumed as 'scientific', 'objectives' or categories of ahistorical meaning, that is to say, as natural phenomena and not of the history of power. This structure has not been defeated and continues to exist today. We are

¹³ The repercussions of these violent actions persist to this day. An example is some national narratives, which often downplay or outright deny the existence of Indigenous peoples in Argentina following the Conquest of the Desert (Lenton, 2012).

referring here to cultural colonisation, which entails the colonisation of the imaginary of the dominated (Quijano, 1992: 12).

This systematic repression targeted specific beliefs, ideas, images, symbols, or knowledge that did not align with the goals of global colonial domination. The repression fell on the ways of knowing, producing knowledge, images, symbols, and modes of signification. Subsequently, dominant patterns of expression, beliefs, and imagery were imposed, serving as highly effective tools for social and cultural control once immediate repression ceased to be constant and systematic (Quijano, 1992: 12).

This sheds light on why the Argentine government perceived the Argentine citizens as inheritors of Spanish culture. The historical repression of the indigenous people created an imaginary of them as ‘other people’. From the period of colonisation until 1878, and arguably even today, indigenous peoples were viewed as representing a barbaric culture in contrast to the civilised population.¹⁴ Their distinct culture was not just seen as different but as inherently inferior. Consequently, within the Argentine legal system, indigenous peoples were often regarded as inferior tribes or marginalised groups.

Colonialism, both historically and contemporarily, is legitimised through the construction of incommensurable differences between colonialists and the colonised. Concepts such as race, reason, and culture serve as tools to create distinct identities. The colonised look evil, uncultured, and barbaric; however, the colonialists are perceived as the good people, possessing culture and representing reason (Quijano & Wallerstein, 1992, Quijano, 2000).

As Walter Mignolo (1993) explains, the distinction between Indigenous people and ‘civilised’ populations is not solely a product of cultural colonisation. For Mignolo, it is essential to consider the geopolitical dimension as well. He introduces the concept of ‘double Creole consciousness’ (*doble conciencia criolla*) to describe the mindset of white Creoles—descendants of Europeans born in the Americas. This consciousness is double because it rests on two intersecting axes: geopolitical and racial. On the one hand, Creoles identified themselves as American, but as European Americans. That is, they conceived America as part of Western culture. On the other hand, they distinguished themselves from Indigenous and African peoples, who were viewed as belonging to pre-colonial civilisations or to African regions that were never considered part of the Western cultural tradition. In this sense, the treatment of Indigenous peoples as subjects without rights is deeply rooted in colonialism and the ongoing structures of coloniality.

The political or ideological instrumentalisation of personal victimhood reinforced this difference. Catherine Lu (2017: 76-79) uses this concept to describe the situation in which individual experiences of victimhood are transformed or co-opted by collectives and states. However, rather than reinforcing internal group cohesion and solidarity, this process may exacerbate unjust and alienating relations between groups. This concept explains why some victims appear as victims while others do not. The racial distinction between indigenous and non-indigenous people helps explain the instrumentalisation of non-indigenous people’s victimhood.

¹⁴ This does not mean that the relationship between the Argentine government—including provincial authorities—and Indigenous peoples was uniform, nor that state policies toward Indigenous communities were always consensual. On the contrary, there were significant debates regarding how Indigenous peoples should be incorporated into the Argentine nation, and these debates took different forms depending on the context. Strategies ranged from peace treaties and negotiations to military campaigns, slavery, and forced assimilation (Lenton, 2014).

There is an idealisation of the victims as innocent and powerless women and children who need to be comforted. If we think about the *malones*, the images of the perpetrators were armed indigenous men attacking women, children, and harmless rural workers. We are talking about people who were pacified living and working in rural areas, and they suffered the attack of some groups of indigenous people. With their attack, the indigenous steal livestock, weapons, money, and even kidnap women and children. Moreover, a big problem here is the lack of distinction between the 'violent' tribes and the rest. The social imaginary homogenised all the indigenous people as violent, and all the victims as peaceful and harmless people. The response to the *malones* is the need to civilise the indigenous people by force.

Why did the civilisation of the indigenous people require violence? Even if one were to accept the notion of engaging in defensive measures against indigenous tribes, it does not justify the widespread murder, enslavement, and rape of thousands of indigenous peoples in Argentine territories. Furthermore, the actions of the government appear to be justified only when viewing indigenous peoples through a particular lens—an image crafted within the context of colonialism, where racism plays a significant role.

Enrique Dussel (2000: 45-46) explains that the word 'Modernity' carries two ambiguous significations. Firstly, Modernity signifies rational emancipation, embodying the Kantian notion of maturity that leads to autonomy. This concept of Modernity emerged in Europe during the 18th century, aligning with Enlightenment thinking. This vision is Eurocentric, as it portrays Modernity as an exclusively intra-European phenomenon—one that requires only Europe to explain its emergence and development.

The second signification has a global sense—not only European—and started in 1492 with the discovery of the Americas. Here, Europe was constituted as the centre of universal history, and the rest occupied the site of the periphery. Here, Modernity is 'an irrational process that is hidden before your very eyes' (Dussel, 2000: 48). This is an irrational process of violence which Dussel describes as a Myth:

(a) Modern civilization understands itself as most developed and superior, since it lacks awareness of its own ideological Eurocentrism. (b) This superiority obliges it to develop the most primitive, uneducated, barbarous extremes. (c) This developmental process ought to follow Europe's, since development is unilineal according to the uncritically accepted developmental fallacy. (d) Since the barbarian opposes this civilizing process, modern praxis ought to exercise violence (a just colonial war) as a last resort in order to destroy any obstacles to modernization. (e) This domination produces its diverse victims and justifies its actions as a sacrifice, an inevitable and quasi-ritual act. Civilizing heroes transform their victims into holocausts of a salvific sacrifice, whether these victims are colonized peoples, African slaves, women, or the ecologically devastated earth. (f) For modernity, the barbarian is at fault for opposing the civilizing process, and modernity, ostensibly innocent, seems to be emancipating the fault of its own victims. (g) Finally, modernity, thinking itself as the civilizing power, regards the sufferings and sacrifices of backward and immature peoples, enslaveable races, and the weaker sex as the inevitable costs of modernization. (Dussel, 1995: 136-137)

Here, I believe, lies the essence of the official rationale used to justify the Conquest of the Desert. The colonial structure fostered social discrimination, which was further entrenched by the perceptions of victims and perpetrators in incidents such as the *malones*. Indigenous peoples as a whole were unjustly branded as violent and held responsible for such attacks. This attribution of violence was often justified by viewing indigenous culture as primitive, uneducated, and barbaric. Within this framework, the response of the 'civilised' culture—embodied by the Argentine

government— was to undertake the mission of ‘civilising’ the indigenous population.

The contradiction between the constitutional and international principles and the Argentine Acts regarding indigenous treatment can be understood by this colonialist view¹⁵. In several acts, we can see the idea of the indigenous as inferior, barbaric, uncultured, and violent, who need to be civilised. The Argentine government understands that the constitutional principles were not in contradiction with its actions, because, previously to having rights, the indigenous people need to be civilised.

A clear example of this was Act 817 (1876). This act promoted the immigration of Europeans and granted them the same rights as Argentine citizens. Moreover, the act offered economic aid for their settlement in the new Argentine territories or the vacant territories. This distinction between European immigrants and indigenous people became expressed in various Act’s sections. For example, when the act established the territorial limits. The majority of lands were territories that the National government could sell, but there was a free part, between the different land subdivisions, that was destined for animal grazing, colonisation by industries, and the indigenous concentration camps (*reducciones*) (section 97). The indigenous people were not considered people with rights. They were considered less than immigrants, almost like animals who needed to be located in a particular sector without land rights.

Here we can recognise a colonial structure. With Iris Marion Young (2006a: 111-112), when I talk about structure, I refer to the

confluence of institutional rules and interactive routines, mobilisation of resources, as well as physical structures such as buildings and roads ... Social structures serve as background conditions for individual actions by presenting actors with options; they provide ‘channels’ that both enable action and constrain it. (Young, 2006a: 111-112)

As Catherine Lu (2017: 35) explains, structural injustices ‘place individuals and groups in social positions or socially produced categories that entail vulnerability to unjust treatment, structural indignity, or objectionable social conditions’. The concept of structural injustice focuses on the social structures and processes that condition their interaction. These interactions can be embodied in different institutions, discourses, and practices (Young, 2006b: 95).

In this sense, the actions against Indigenous people showed the idea of civilisation. Slavery on various agricultural and livestock farms was a form of ‘education’ for ‘being productive’, contrary to the ‘natural’ indigenous practices of ‘being lazy’. The rape of indigenous women followed racial mixing to finish with the indigenous descendant. The baptism of indigenous children and handing them over to non-indigenous families was a brutal form of conversion to a new culture, a ‘civilised’ culture.

Beyond this, even accepting these ideas did not justify the Argentine government’s actions against the indigenous people. Racism and colonialism cannot justify military campaigns because they are morally wrong attitudes. There were political principles that prohibited all the subjugation suffered by the indigenous people. As Diana Lenton (2010: 38) explains, some political discourse of the time

¹⁵ An important reference here is Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2020) who shows the different tensions between rights and different topics in human life product of colonialism context. In his works Santos describe the idealization of human rights ‘evolution’ and how this were focused only in a specific type of person: Christian and heterosexual white men. Women, Indigenous, blacks, Asian and the community LGBT+ were not considered subject of human rights.

acknowledged that the violence against Indigenous peoples violated constitutional principles such as liberty, property, and equality. Members of parliament, including Mariano Demaría, German Puebla¹⁶, and Aristóbulo del Valle,¹⁷ denounced practices such as slavery as affronts to human dignity. In their speeches, they expressed concern that such violence was barbaric and fundamentally contradicted the ideals of civilisation that the government was supposed to embody. Moreover, as shown by Delrio, Lenton, Musante, Nagy, Papazian, and Pérez (2010), there were different newspaper reports about the violence against the Indigenous people.

However, the subjugation happened because there was a colonialist context where racism permitted discrimination. This situation did not originate in the Conquest of the Desert, and neither finish here, as the history of racism shows us. Given this, it becomes very difficult to justify the government's policies toward Indigenous peoples; we are confronted with a clear injustice that can only be explained through the lens of racism operating within a colonial context.

4.2. A Frontier Problem against Whom?

The hegemonic perspective maintains that the Conquest of the Desert was necessary to secure Argentina's territorial rights. In order to defend its southern frontier, the Argentine army needed to advance as far as the Negro River. This was considered feasible due to the relatively small number of Indigenous warriors. Moreover, the expansion promised significant economic benefits, particularly in terms of Patagonia's agricultural and territorial potential. A further justification was geopolitical, centred on Argentina's frontier dispute with Chile. A key concern was the trade made by Indigenous people in Chile. Julio Argentino Roca, for example, argued that many Indigenous groups identified as Chilean and engaged in commerce involving stolen goods acquired through *malones*.

The idea that Indigenous people were identified as Chilean is based on two key misconceptions. The first concerns the Mapuche people—one of the most significant indigenous groups in the Pampean and Patagonian territories. Their sense of nationality was not tied to Argentina or Chile but rather to their territory, Wallmapu, which spans regions and provinces in both countries: Bío Bío and Araucanía in Chile and Chubut, Neuquén, Río Negro, La Pampa, Mendoza, and parts of San Luis, Córdoba, and Buenos Aires in Argentina (Bañales-Seguel et al., 2020). Within the Mapuche people, distinct communities such as Pewenches, Williches, and Lafkenches exist, each shaped by unique contexts and cultural practices, particularly regarding food (Rozzi et al., 2023). Despite these differences, trade and shared cultural identity fostered strong interconnectedness across the Mapuche territory.

The second misconception involves the belief that indigenous communities collaborated with Chilean livestock thieves during the *malones*. As previously discussed, the Argentine government employed an ideological strategy to homogenise Indigenous peoples as violent barbarians. However, the situation was far more complex. Susana Bandieri (2000) notes that leaders of southern Patagonian tribes often identified as Argentines and recognised the Argentine government as an authority. They sought to differentiate themselves from Pampean chiefs, whom they viewed as responsible for the violent *malones*. Moreover, as we have seen previously, Roca identifies Pampean tribes as aggressive.

¹⁶ National Congress. 1885. Chamber of Deputies Journal of Sessions, 30/10/1884

¹⁷ National Congress. 1885. Chamber of Senators Journal of Sessions, 19/08/1884

This situation makes it difficult to talk about a real frontier problem. The idea that Chilean indigenous made *malones* to thief livestock, weapons, money, and even kidnap women and children to trade in Chilean territory, was not well-founded. The Wallmapu notion explains the commerce and travel made by the Mapuche people. This did not respond to the idea of Chilean sovereignty, but rather to an indigenous identity more related to a shared culture than a country's frontiers. Even if there were violent groups that committed these crimes, the attack had to be focused on these specific groups, not all the Indigenous people.

Moreover, the relationship with the Patagonian communities, who recognised the Argentine authority, was formalised in different treaties.¹⁸ These treaties were about peace, commerce, and mutual defence that included the frontiers with Chile. Here we have a problem: if Argentina had several treaties with Indigenous people, how can they attack them without breaching them?¹⁹ Part of the answer is located in the notions of coloniality and civilisation-progress dichotomy. As we looked at before, these are tools to create an image of the indigenous people as violent barbarians who need to be civilised by force. Moreover, these reasons cannot justify the violence against the indigenous people.

The hegemonic perspective about the Conquest of the Desert justifies breaching peace treaties by the Argentine government because these were seen as tricks employed by the indigenous people. From this perspective, indigenous people used the treaties to gain military protection and warrant commerce with the Argentine farms. However, this peace was only a fiction because they could always retreat to the Malones and resume the war against the Argentine government.

According to Susana Bandieri (2000: 127-128), the conflicts with indigenous people during the 19th century were largely driven by the expansion of livestock production. For her, until the first half of the century, the dominion of Patagonia was indigenous. During this period, the Argentine government signed a lot of treaties with the Indigenous people, and there was rich commerce between the frontiers. However, during the second half of the 19th century, Argentina was inserted into the international market with a clear function: to provide raw materials and food. Here, the livestock frontier needed to expand.

The livestock oligarchy put a lot of pressure on expanding the frontiers. The incorporation of new territories obeyed the necessity of the new kind of production. In the 19th century, most Argentine territory was located in a part of the Pampean region characterised by plains without forests. This region has been the most important for livestock farming and maize, wheat, and soya plantations. On the other hand, Patagonia's climate permits sheep farming. In this sense, the Conquest of the Desert permitted the expansion of economic activities over the Pampean region and the initiation of sheep farming in the Patagonia region.

Janna Thompson (2002) explains that governments have to keep their promises, but they can present good excuses for not keeping an agreement: it may have been made under duress or in ignorance; unforeseen circumstances or moral considerations may vitiate it. However, when examining coloniality in action, it is

¹⁸ This relationship between Argentine government and Indigenous communities presents some problems that cannot be dealt with here. For example, some scholars speak of a relationship between two or more different nations, so the treaties were part of the international law. However, these nations could be sovereigns or could have suffered a colonisation process. On the other hand, some scholars think that the treaties were between two Argentine parts. For a more specific study on this issue see Pérez Zavala (2014).

¹⁹ Part of this response is based on different strategies made by the Argentine government to delay the signing of these treaties or created excuses to not apply them. For a more specific study on this issue see de Jong (2011).

difficult to argue that the Argentine government had legitimate excuses for breaching treaties and failing to fulfil its promises. For Thompson, such breaches constitute an injustice that compounds the violence already inflicted on Indigenous peoples. Furthermore, treaty violations provide a clear test case for understanding and addressing historical injustices.

In effect, as we saw in the previous sections, the 1878 Argentine government and different scholars justified the Conquest of the Desert with different ideological strategies that permitted violence in different forms. Treaty violations cannot be justified, less of all these violations can justify the violence against the indigenous people. On the contrary, we can recognise the Argentine government's actions against the indigenous people as an injustice because there was no justification.

Moreover, the injustice was not only the treaty violations. As explained by Santiago Truccone (2021), the advance over the indigenous territories was an injustice because Argentina did not respect the indigenous people's occupancy rights. The occupancy right is the right to reside permanently in a place and to participate in different practices ongoing there. Therefore, this right includes immunity from expropriation or removal (Stilz, 2019: 35). The Argentine army's advance over the indigenous territories implies the occupancy of these territories and the imposition of new economic, political, and social practices. As we saw previously, these practices were different for indigenous and non-indigenous people, because only the latter had been considered people with rights. On the contrary, the indigenous were subjugated and obligated to work as slaves in other territories, or condemned to live in concentration camps (*reducciones*).

The war and the frontier problems indeed are some of the most common forms to modify the states' territories or create new states. However, the problem here is related to the role played by the people in the formation of each country. There is a common opinion that a country's institutional practices and normative system are fair if its people are considered citizens. In other words, the state has to consider them as subjects with rights and they can participate in the public dialogue. The indigenous people were subjugated by the Argentine state; they suffered the imposition of the Argentine institutional practices (Truccone, 2021), and they were not considered citizens.

Moreover, if the subjugation and imposition of a racial order were unjust from 1878, this could change if the indigenous people were respected in their own culture, at least —how to explain Truccone (2024)— if they participated in the public dialogue in Argentina's institutional practices and the normative system as made-rulers. The problem here is, precisely, that they did not participate and they do not participate in institutional practices²⁰.

In conclusion, the frontier problems are based on two misconceptions: the Wallmapu territory and the commerce with Chile. Both misconceptions were fundamental in trying to justify the violation of treaties. However, this violation was a fundamental injustice against the indigenous people. Moreover, product of this violation, the Argentine government subjugated the indigenous people and violated their territorial rights.

5. Conclusions

In this paper, I reconstructed two justifications employed by the Argentine government in 1878: the idea of civilisation and progress to 'civilise' indigenous

²⁰ In his book, Truccone suggests that a good example of this would be a constitutional reform in Congress to guarantee representation for Indigenous peoples.

peoples, and the purported frontier problem between Argentina and indigenous tribes. I critically examined each of these justifications.

I demonstrated that, even if we were to accept the premise of a defensive war aimed at stopping the *malones*, the violence against indigenous captives cannot be justified. Acts of subjugation, slavery, sexual violence, and the kidnapping of children were explicitly prohibited by Argentina's legal framework at the time. Only the colonial imaginary —coloniality— can account for the normalisation of such violence as an 'inevitable' step towards civilisation.

The so-called frontier problems were similarly rooted in colonial violence. However, this justification reveals two additional injustices: the violation of treaties and the imposition of an institutional order that persists to this day.

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