Indigenous Imaginaries of the Republic

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Abstract

This paper considers the ways indigenous leaders conceived of their relationship with and role in the Argentine republic around the time of the so-called ‘conquest of the desert’ from 1879-1885. The massive expansion of the Argentine state through the conquest and integration of the Pampas brought with it a violent encounter with the indigenous peoples of the region. Oddly, that encounter was rendered, both at the time and subsequently, an act of forgetting. The conquest was depicted as one of the natural world, with the indios excised from the collective memory of the republic.

Many of the indios conquered by the state and forgotten by society had their own autonomous imaginaries of a role in the republican order of the late 19th century. Three caciques in particular, Namuncura, Saygueque and Casimiro Patagon, challenged the social amnesia by claiming a place in the republican world. Those claims were expressed visually – through photographs – as well as textually – through archived correspondence with the state. These caciques not only challenged the imputation of their barbarism, but also laid claim to the promise of liberalism in the form of citizenship. Though ultimately unsuccessful, the fact these men imagined a future where they were part of the republican order, rather than erased from its memory speaks to the alternate possibilities forwarded, but ultimately foreclosed as the Argentine republic emerged as a modern nation-state in the late 19th century.

Though not migrants, the subjugation of these indios was definitional of the migratory state of the late 19th century. Their’s is the purposefully forgotten history upon which a new, migrant-majority society would be built in the newly opened lands of the Pampas. Further, their failed assertions of participation in the political life of the republic necessarily entailed claims to a globalized Atlantic world the it was part of.