

# Blood, Fire, and Faith: The Mechanisms of Dispossession in 18th Century Chaco

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“If money (...) comes into the world with a congenital blood stain in one cheek, capital comes dripping from head to toe, from every pore, with blood and dirt.”

– Karl Marx, Capital Vol. I

## Introduction

A far cry from the early ceremonies of possession and classic arrival scenes depicted in colonial literature of the time, the conquest and colonization of what we now know as the Southern Cone lowlands unfolded slowly over an extended period. This was primarily due to the presence of nomadic or semi-nomadic groups but also because, compared to Mesoamerica and the Andes, the lowlands initially seemed to lack the precious materials in the subsoil that would make their exploitation an attractive venture for early Spanish explorers. Together with the almost universal refusal by the native populations to be incorporated into formal labor systems (such as the *encomienda*)<sup>1</sup>, the result is a long history of offensive and defensive actions across a vast territory, with varying levels of success or failure depending on the perspective taken (Verdesio 2001). Still, these processes have much to offer to colonial studies and the discussion on original and renewed dispossession.

In the case of the lands referred to by the Spanish as “El Chaco,” “El Gran Chaco Gualamba,” and other names, their existence as a frontier and

an inland territory between spaces of colonial control, namely Tucumán and Asunción’s areas of influence,<sup>2</sup> strengthened the colonialist desire for expansion and dominance. The colonizers’ aspiration to establish a trade route connecting Asunción to Alto Peru through the Chaco is evident in documents starting in the 16th century and provides context for a significant portion of the actions against “the inlands” [*tierra adentro*]<sup>3</sup>, which is to say, the space controlled by Indigenous groups. In this article, I assess the relationship between an offensive strategy and a defensive one (a military campaign and the subsequent establishment of Jesuit missions) considering some ideas about renewed accumulation, original terror, and indigenous insurgency.

## II. Accumulation by Dispossession, Original Terror, and Indigenous Insurgency

Several authors have discussed the concept of “primitive or original accumulation” presented by Marx (1990 [1867]), and some critiques are particularly relevant to colonial studies. Rosa Luxemburg (1951 [1913]) expanded the territorial scope of the model, noting that a society

<sup>1</sup> Although not generalized in the lowlands, this system was important in the Paraguay region (Roulet 1993; Quarleri 2009) and had a presence in northeastern cities of what is now Argentina (Salinas 2008).

<sup>2</sup> By this I mean the area delimited (in a porous manner) by the borders of Córdoba, Corrientes, and Santiago del Estero to the south, the Andean foothills to the west, the Paraguay River and Asunción to the east, and the Pilcomayo River to the north. Currently, the Gran Chaco includes territories of Argentina, Bolivia, Paraguay, and Brazil.

<sup>3</sup> For a discussion on the different meanings associated with *tierra adentro* in the Chaco context see Lucaioli 2021.

grounded in capitalist accumulation requires at least two interdependent spaces. On the one hand, it requires the existence of a market for goods where economic exchange takes place and surplus value is generated: factories, mines, and agricultural estates. In this space, commercial activity is presented as the exchange of things with equal value according to the laws of commodities. On the other hand, this seemingly peaceful sphere is sustained by capital relations on the international stage, where colonial policies, credit systems, war, fraud, force, usury, oppression, and looting are openly employed as an integral part of the accumulation process. The relationship between capitalist and non-capitalist systems, between regulated spaces and the apparent chaos of political violence, is entirely productive.

While Luxemburg's critique shifts the focus to colonial spaces, which are somewhat neglected in Marx's work,<sup>4</sup> David Harvey's (2004) much later reading intervenes in the dynamics of the "origin" as something relegated to a past separate from the present. Based on the idea of "accumulation by dispossession," he allows us to see dispossession as a process that never stopped but rather has evolved to include new domains. These domains have traditionally been limited to material assets, such as countries, regions, and territories; but in the present, they also extend to areas like financial speculation and the virtual world. In both cases, capital spreads to areas it hadn't previously reached, continuing to accumulate in a renewed and relentless manner. These two critiques allow me to review the genealogy of predatory practices on lands and people as part of a deep history

whose common denominator is nothing other than "accumulation powered by looting"<sup>5</sup> (Viñas 1983). In the case of the projects I discuss here, the relationship between military campaigns and Jesuit missions in the Chaco becomes clear when we understand that, regardless of their many differences, they represent two efforts with a common goal: the advancement of the frontier, understood as the advancement of "striated" space (colonial agents) over "smooth" space (the inlands and uncontrolled groups of people).<sup>6</sup>

The guiding idea behind combining these two forms of managing territory and people is that Jesuit missionaries could attempt to implement a labor extraction model only because they capitalized on the violent dispossession that military expeditions had begun much earlier.<sup>7</sup> It is only through an original terror founded on the extermination of Indigenous bodies in the early decades of conquest that one can move towards other, more regulated forms of exploitation. I take the suggestion to remember that "even these forms of expansion considered benign compared to colonization need revisiting to understand their relationship with the violence they want to differentiate themselves from" (Del Valle 2009)<sup>8</sup>. It is essential to remember that every attempt to advance the frontier towards the Chaco carries within it the violence necessary for its maintenance. In the early decades of exploration, documents narrate military expeditions to the inlands constituted by armies of "friendly Indians" and Jesuit priests. The relations between these agents of colonial rule would complicate in the 18th century when their interests and ambitions would pit them against each other. Still, I propose to evaluate the foundational and renewed

<sup>4</sup> Two other important direct mentions in this work are on pages 915 and 917 (Marx 1990 [1867]), about the exploitation of subsoil resources and the treatment given to Indigenous populations respectively.

<sup>5</sup> Original text quotes *la acumulación cabalgada en el saqueo*, the translation is mine.

<sup>6</sup> I consider the inlands to be a smooth space, which does not imply homogeneity but rather a field of multiplicities without conduits or channels, a contact space that can only be recognized through legwork and is incapable of being observed from a point external to itself (Deleuze and Guattari 1987). This space is always situated among striated spaces, which are controlled by states, and whose nature tends towards homogenization through the regulation of behaviors and representations.

<sup>7</sup> I find a similar argument, although not phrased in these terms, in Roulet's work about the initial decades of Guaraní insurgence, the violence inflicted upon them and the later imposition of both *encomienda* and Jesuit missions (Roulet 1993).

<sup>8</sup> My translation.

dispossession of this region considering their endeavors as part of a broader mechanism of space-production and appropriation.

With regards to insurgency, I shall say first that the space known as “the inlands” or Chaco is an insurgent space as understood by Moreiras: “The constitutive outside of modern imperial reason is a principle of insurgency that can only be understood negatively, that is, as whatever has not yet been subjected to the ‘directive self-adjusting guarantee of the security of domination’, and hence as what remains subjectible” (Moreiras 2000). To this, I add the insurgency of nomadic and semi-nomadic Indigenous groups not subject to colonial control, also called “enemy Indians” or “slave Indians” in texts and cartography, who posed a constant threat to the stability of colonial projects. Often, in texts and cartographic records, the characteristics of the terrain and native groups are conflated in a discursive operation that I tend to read as an expulsion of Indigenous people from the realm of culture into the realm of nature.<sup>9</sup> Alternatively, we may view this conflation as indicative of the danger that both entities represented (sometimes jointly) to the agents of the state.

By the late 17th and early 18th centuries, the political and physical landscape of the Chaco was characterized by Indigenous forms of habitation and mobility, with frontier spaces where colonial enclaves struggled to remain viable. Indigenous groups occupied the lands and colonial enclaves according to their own logic and interests. In this sense, the destruction or “siege” [*asedio*] of colonial cities in the last decades of the 17th century was a successful Indigenous strategy that kept colonial administrators and residents constantly on alert. Even when cities were destroyed by natural events, as in the case of Esteco (1567-1609), scholars believe that seismic movements were only able to destroy the city

because it was a territory that the Hispanic-Creoles did not politically dominate, and from which *encomenderos* fled without the will to rebuild (Gordillo 2014).

In this context, the military campaign that is presented in the next section was a direct response to the abandonment of Esteco;<sup>10</sup> and it was “the largest and most brutal military campaign ever carried out by the Spanish in the Gran Chaco, which sowed terror in a wide area of the Salado and Bermejo” (Gordillo 2014). One should keep in mind that, however significant, this is only one of the many campaigns to the inlands, coming both from Paraguay and Tucuman over the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. In colonial cities, residents’ discontent was expressed in numerous letters, threatening to abandon towns unless the issue of Indigenous insurrection was resolved. The dynamics between spaces of colonial control and insurgent spaces seem to replicate the broader mechanism of dispossession. We may consider that their peace and harmony depend on what happens in their “exterior,” that is, the inlands. Here, the smaller enclaves that were in close communication with spaces not subject to colonial control also played a role in the larger processes of accumulation, mainly, by layering various forms of dispossession on insurgent spaces and groups.

### III. Military Campaigns and Jesuit Reductions

In the words of Urizar, the Chaco was “the bloody wound of Tucumán” that needed war for the region to be “pacified by blood and fire.”<sup>11</sup> In 1708, the governor sent a report to His Majesty King Philip V about the “state of war,” where he outlined the main background while declaring his position on the Chaco, its inhabitants, and the attitude that should be adopted in the future. The entire letter is a petition for Crown approval of not

<sup>9</sup> A detailed analysis of this operation through cartographic records can be found in Pensa 2021.

<sup>10</sup> For further information about Esteco, its development as a center for Indigenous slavery, and the myths that surround its destruction, see Gordillo 2014.

<sup>11</sup> The document cited in this section is called: “Carta del Gobernador de Tucumán, Esteban de Urizar y Arespacochaga” November 28, 1708 [AGI-Charcas]. All translations are mine.

only an offensive war but also the distribution of “Indians and *piezas*” in *encomiendas* and their denaturalization. Urizar describes the “miserable state” in which the province of Tucumán finds itself due to the depopulation of frontier cities (especially Esteco), attributing its decline to Indigenous incursions and the impossibility of stopping them due to the inefficiency of “defensive warfare.” According to the governor, “defensive warfare has worse effects, slowly consuming and annihilating the cities on this frontier, leaving their inhabitants with less strength to endure it” [*la guerra defensiva tiene peores efectos pues con lentitud va consumiendo y aniquilando las ciudades de esta frontera los vezinos de ellas tienen menos fuerza para tolerarla*]. At the same time, he highlights the loyalty to the Crown of those “neighbors” who have borne the various burdens that this defense entailed. Because of its immense value and fertile lands where livestock and crops flourished, the province of Tucumán needed to go on the offensive against the dangers surrounding it. Mainly, the “cruel invasions of the barbarians” that threatened the livestock, plantations, and the best estates of colonial cities, which invaded and withdrew “slaughtering their children and relatives with knives.” Urizar does not hesitate to identify the enemies of Tucumán:

This province has as neighbors many indigenous people from various nations on the eastern side, whose frontier for more than two hundred leagues was their habitation initially inland on the banks of the mighty rivers and sheltered by their forests. They have never used fixed settlements, always wandering from place to place, eating roots, herbs, honey, wild

fruits, and fish from the rivers and lakes that are abundant in all their terrains. (Urizar 1708, November 24). [AGI-Charcas].<sup>12</sup>

The governor then presents his case for offensive actions against this enemy. He considers that defensive strategies, such as exploration of the inlands and emplacement of isolated enclaves are not sufficient to prevent Indigenous groups from attacking the cities, “knowing that once the Spanish withdrew, the land remained theirs.” The governor concludes that “the experiences of these hostilities forced most owners of estates to abandon them,” primarily due to the loss of livestock, crops, and even clothes of the “neighbors” who were forced to defend themselves whenever the cities were attacked. From all that is mentioned, it seems that defensive warfare was the “total ruin of this province.” His proposal could not be clearer, and it is worth including in its entirety:

The state of it [the province] requires the last and effective remedy, which is to wage war by fire and blood until the barbarians are denaturalized from the thickets where they shelter, living like beasts without politics, property, or customs that resemble those of men but of tigers thirsty for Christian blood, as evidenced by the many deaths they have executed, and the common belief that they eat human flesh, and they are even worse than tigers since they kill their own children, as seen in this city of Salta in the year 1705. There is no hope, not even remote, that they will be reduced by the gentle means of preaching, nor even that they will give peace, and even if they did, it should not be accepted as secure. (Urizar 1708, November 24 [AGI-Charcas]).<sup>13</sup>

<sup>12</sup> “Tiene esta provincia por fronterizos muchos indios de barrias naciones a la parte del Oriente, cuia frontera por mas de doscientas leguas fue su avitacion en los principios tierra adentro a las margenes de los caudalosos rios y al abrigo de sus bosques, nunca han usado poblacion fija, andando siempre bagos de sitio en sitio comen raíces yerba miel frutas silbestres y el pescado de los rios y lagunas que ai copia en su terreno”.

<sup>13</sup> “El estado señor de ella [la provincia] precisa el ultimo y eficaz remedio que es, llevar la guerra a fuego y sangre hasta desnaturalizar a los barbaros de los vozques de que se abriga donde viven como fieras sin politica ni propiedad o costumbre que parezca de hombres, sino de tigres sedientos de la sangre de los xtianos, como lo acreditan las muchas muertes que han executado, y el comun sentir de que comen carne humana, y aun son peores que tigres pues matan a sus propios hijos como se vio en esta ciudad de salta el año de setecientos cinco. Noai esperanza ni aun remota de que se redusgan por el suave medio de la predicacion, ni tanpoco de que den la paz, y aun casso que la dieran no se devia admitir por mal segura”.

The Indigenous groups are characterized as worse than tigers thirsty for blood, and the only “effective remedy” is to wage war on them until they have been completely excised from the land they inhabit, as clarified later, “it will be necessary to keep these barbarians a great distance from their nature (...) retaining only the individuals up to the age of fourteen to serve as partial reward to the deserving participants in this war.” Again, the expulsion of Indigenous groups from the sphere of culture and into the sphere of nature manifests by transferring characteristics of animality and even monstrosity into the natives. He emphasizes the impossibility of peacefully reducing natives through evangelization and, what is more, rejects any peace proposal, considering it unsafe. With the argument set, there is only one possible strategy: offensive warfare aimed at capturing individuals for distribution and displacement. It is a political strategy implemented through military actions that aim to dismantle Indigenous resistance and vacate the territories.

These campaigns took place in 1710-1711 with relative success, as suggested by Lucaioli (Nacuzzi and Lucaioli 2010), since Urizar did not manage to form lasting alliances with other colonial enclaves. The concrete results were a decrease in conflict on the Tucumán frontier and a reduction of some Indigenous groups. Less immediately, Vitar suggests that Urizar’s actions were significant for the subjugation of Indigenous groups and the subsequent foundation of Jesuit reductions on the western frontier (Vitar 1997). On this latter point, I would like to elaborate further. Numerous records demonstrate the presence of Jesuit priests in military campaigns decades before the establishment of reductions in the Chaco inland, and some even reflect on the natives’ aversion to both the military and the Jesuits: “In military entries into new conquests, soldiers committed many injustices against the locals; it would follow that the Indians, upon seeing Jesuits among the

soldiers, would view them with the same hatred and aversion [they have for the soldiers], and the intended goal of their conversion would not be achieved”. (Lozano 1941 [1733]).<sup>14</sup>

One of the pillars of Jesuit discourse is the classification of Indigenous groups into different scales of “civilization” that result in different strategies to relate with them and convert them to Catholicism. Father Joseph Acosta,<sup>15</sup> one of the most important voices of the Order in the Americas, was responsible for a text in which hunter-gatherers and nomads are classified as “barbarians” against whom, by virtue of their lack of civilization signs and customs, it is legitimate to use violence to ensure conversion. Early on, Jesuits joined the military because they considered Indigenous resistance an insolence that should not be tolerated and sought “to open the door to the Chaco, closed for so long, so that the gospel could enter” (Cartas Anuas 1668-1675). The priests who were sent “into the interior of the Chaco” on exploration or mission-founding expeditions did so “with the protection of Spanish arms” (Trujillo in Cartas Anuas 1928), something that, far from ensuring their success, foreshadowed their limited reach. This strategy would subsequently be replaced by one in which the Jesuits aimed to distance themselves from the military presence. The Provincial Father of Paraguay, Diego de Boroa, said, “to experiment if conversion could be achieved without the noise of weapons,” as the priests feared “making the Gospel odious, with the barbarians seeing ministers of peace amid an invading army” (Lozano 1941 [1733]).<sup>16</sup> Paradoxically, the source, *Descripción corográfica del Gran Chaco Gualamba*, signed by the historian and Jesuit priest Pedro Lozano (1697-1752), was written based on a commission from the already mentioned Governor of Tucumán, Urizar, who entrusted the task of this description to the Superiors of the Society of Jesus to praise their offensive

<sup>14</sup> “En las entradas militares a conquistas nuevas, cometían los soldados muchas injusticias contra los paisanos; de que se seguiría, que viendo éstos entre ellos a los Jesuitas, se granjearían igualmente el odio y aversión común de los indios, y no se conseguiría el fin pretendido de su conversión”.

<sup>15</sup> *De procuranda Indorum Salute* (La predicación del evangelio en las Indias, 1984 [1588]).

<sup>16</sup> “Hacer odioso el Evangelio, viendo metidos los bárbaros a ministros de la paz en medio a un ejército invasor”.

actions in the 1710 campaign previously referred to (Vitar 1997). The abandonment of a constant and simultaneous presence with the military materializes in (more or less) lasting reductions by the mid-eighteenth century, which can only be agreed upon because, at the basis of that agreement, lies the memory of terror inflicted by previous experiences.

In the mid-eighteenth century, the Jesuit reductions served as focal points for the conversion of Indigenous communities into Christian families. These were centers of labor administration that held significance in the political and symbolic economy of the colonies. According to Coulthard (2014), they were places where the market, racism, the patriarchal system, and state relations converged to facilitate a specific power effect, and in the case of Indigenous Peoples, the reproduction of hierarchical social relations that facilitated territorial dispossession. Thus, the intended distance between the Jesuit project and the military enterprise ended up being only a strategy, as military and Jesuit objectives were materially and discursively related.

#### IV. Final Thoughts

The experience of the military campaigns in the early 18th century shapes, for the Indigenous Peoples of the Chaco, an original terror and constitutes the foundation of imperial reason. Moreiras used this concept to discuss the early years of conquest in Central America and, in the case of the Chaco, I employ it to refer to the first decades of conquest in the Chaco inlands that occurred almost a century later. This collective experience of violence becomes a precedent and a threat, subsequently serving as a negotiation point for other administrative projects such as the Jesuit missions. The precedent of violence and terror set by the military campaigns far exceeds its success in immediate terms, although we cannot estimate the number of deaths and denaturalizations for which they were responsible. Any process of dispossession needs to be considered within a

long history of interethnic contacts that, for many groups, eroded their autonomy against colonial state agents.

Peace on the frontier and in the cities is contingent upon chaos in another space, the inland or Chaco, a territory controlled by Indigenous people. In the military campaigns, the terrain appears as an object to conquer, requiring the eradication of Indigenous resistance. Urizar attempts to implement a plan that begins with physical extermination (offensive war) and continues with the systematic breaking of social and productive ties that link indigenous individuals to their ethnic community, their ancestral homelands, and their forms of subsistence (denaturalization). The territoriality of highly mobile groups represents a threat to state power, so the terrain becomes a space to attempt to populate, conquer, and subjugate these ways of life. In the Jesuit missions, the goal is—different means—to achieve a moral and religious conversion that disrupts this form of territoriality, often incomprehensible to conquerors, on which traditional forms of organization, resistance, and subsistence depend. In other words, these two projects are united in a genealogy of dispossession of Indigenous territories and bodies.

Despite their intentions, neither Urizar's military actions nor the establishment of reductions on the Chaco frontier could completely break Indigenous resistance during the colonial period. The inlands, those terrains between Tucumán and Paraguay that interrupted the colonial state, could only be conquered by weapons in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. However, attempts to eliminate the Indigenous People (through extermination, denial, or assimilation) do not occur in isolation but instead constitute a series of ongoing and interrelated attacks on Indigenous Peoplehood and sovereignty. Considering that extractive or predatory operations can be grouped and form series with others (such as the foundation of cities, sugar mills, state institutions, etc.) this article is an attempt to trace the history of a territory and its Indigenous inhabitants through the renewed acts of dispossession that colonizers tried to exert over them.

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