

Project: Tué Tué

A collection of personal stories, mythical and inexplicable

Earthmoving

Los Muermos is about sixty kilometers west of Puerto Montt. Like other small, peripheral and unknown towns in the area, it remained confused and suspended in time when the railway branch from Antilgüe to Los Muermos was closed. [1] Those towns keep an air of honesty and austerity far different from that of other modern cities in the zone, with their overdone touristic charms: roses, lakes, postcard volcanoes and a Germanic ostentation, as if they had reached perfection. *Performance* and commitment placed them closer to an enclave or a foreign touristic delirium, hardly understood by Chilean aborigines or peasants living in remote locations. It is a good example of disconnection from a geographical context, valid only as a landscape description and cartography for touristic consumption.

I will refer to other areas, unknown and less flashy, such as *San Carlos del Ñadi*, in the Commune of Los Muermos. It is an irregular landscape of coastal mountains, streams and pockets of native forest, mistreated beauty. It is one of the regions where some Chileans and Mapuches were confined, since in the central areas, in the plains of the valley, German settlers had established themselves some one hundred and sixty years ago. I keep in my memory some settlers left behind in that zone, specifically in the area near Ñadi: Sibar, Winkler, Duval and Droperman; the other inhabitants are Chileans and Mapuches, split into small plots of around twenty hectares on average. Germans themselves are the owners of hundreds, even thousands of hectares, making it easy to calculate and understand the domination of settlers in the area, as well as their industrial handling of the landscape and the economic productivity of the zone. They are masters and proprietors; it still looks like a foreign occupation after a century and a half, in spite of the leader of settlers, Carlos Anwandter. [2] German settlers are perceived at first sight as arrogant and untouchable, and one of the causes for this could be their affinity with traditional Chilean landowners, accustomed as they were to human exploitation, to the power they had because of their ownership of land, with all the bad behavior attached to it.

They eventually become part of the political establishment, sharing its power, since their affinity with republican values or their lust for regional power cannot be denied. Take for example the case of ex-General Rodolfo Stange, former Director of the Carabineros, the Chilean Police, who became a member of the military Junta during the dictatorship of General Augusto Pinochet. Upon the return of democracy, General Stange was democratically elected as Senator for Los Lagos Region. German settlers are undoubtedly very different from the common Chilean citizens; they are totally disconnected from the popular customs and traditions of the Chilean peasants. In southern Chile they are still known as *gringos* or Germans. They have never fully integrated into Chilean society because there has not been a real crossbreeding that could have helped. On the contrary, settlers boasted of that racial difference as a divine prerogative, a clear racial difference, perhaps the most remarkable in Chile. They did not mix with Chileans, kept a distance from them and took advantage of the colonization policies set up by the eugenic legislation [3] then regulating immigration in southern Chile, as was common in South America at the time. In 1845 [4] a bill on selective immigration was passed, whose main purpose was to promote colonization of southern Chile, inspired by a racist spirit, the whitening of the skin and the brain evolution of Chileans. In Mexico, Brazil and Peru these ideas were still more popular, since some local institutions were created to promote “Galtonian” [5] theories whose aim was to pass bills in favor of European immigration based on its supposed racial superiority. [6]

As a child I used to visit my uncles, who worked as tenants of Germans in the nearby town of Loncotoro. They lived with their family in a small place within the farm belonging to the *gringo*. It was a house improved after the agrarian reform, [7] when landowners were obliged to provide better housing for their workers. “Pigs used to live a better life than us,” a fieldworker told me then. But the wages did not improve, since the State imposed a

[1] Southern railway branches: the State of Chile appears in the imagination of the south when the steam train made its entrance in the most remote locations, as a miraculous machine whose mechanical power could be seen and heard. The State was no longer an abstract and intangible concept, since it appeared engraved on its waggons as *Ferrocarriles del Estado de Chile*. It connected practically all distant places, as it did with Santiago, the capital. Those were glorious times for the Chilean nation; monumental public works justified titanic efforts in pursuit of a superior social progress, and the steam train was a milestone in a worldly dimension of railway connection.

[2] “We shall be Chilean citizens, as honest and hardworking as we can be; we shall defend our adopted country, joining the ranks of our new countrymen against all foreign oppression, with the decision and firmness of the man who defends his own country, his family and his interests. This country will never have reason to regret its wise, human and generous decision to take us as its children...” – Carlos Anwandter, programme relating to German settlers, 18 November 1851.

[3] Eugenics is a pragmatic social science based on theories of artificial human selection, by means of genetic and social manipulation. It studies the improvement of the human species in order to deliver it from their possible “undesirable” or non-viable characteristics.

[4] The purpose of the law on selective immigration of 1845 in Chile was the colonization of certain unpopulated areas in the southern part of the country between Valdivia and Puerto Montt. It favoured the immigration of Europeans of middle and high socio-cultural background in order to colonize cities in southern Chile. The task was in charge of Vicente Pérez Rosales by order of President Manuel Montt.

“minimum wage” [8] of around 18,000 pesos a month (some US\$ 36), which allowed the persistence of inequality. My uncle retired after a lifetime of hard work, and he only got a miserable pension.

Despite this adverse situation, the local population created an imaginary world and a naïve appreciation of the character of Germans, taking for granted a sort of cynical paternalism on their side, and a weak and corrosive labor dependency. [9] This latest condition seems more evident due to the lack of alternative jobs, since they are reduced to three areas mainly: small farm plots, medium size farms and salmon fisheries.

Prior to its colonization, the territory had been inhabited for centuries. There was a short period of intermarriage, and afterwards European settlers fought their way into the territory. Property was permanently under threat, and disputes and crimes were frequent. There is the story of Moraga, a delinquent who used to steal lands, assault and kill their tenants, Chileans and Mapuches, and supposedly worked for certain German settlers, until he was murdered while in action in the Yervas Buenas mountains. The story concludes with his killers brought to trial for murder, and Moraga’s body slung across a horse, his head hanging without brains.

In 1912, the Chilean State ousted a community of Huilliches in Osorno, with a disastrous result. This episode is known as the “*Forrahue killings*”. [10]

This situation was (is) common specifically in the Mapuche territory, in southern Chile, reaching in most cases high levels of cruelty and impunity. This violence was a result of a territorial dispute, a crude product of a peculiar concept of wilderness, fraud for land acquisition, incompetence, illegality and a racist spirit then prevailing in the country. [11]

Colonization eventually became a reality, transforming the area into a clearing. Few people can imagine a native forest at its peak, followed by its subsequent collapse after a ferocious logging. Old people used to tell stories about underground fires that lasted for years, thus explaining the origins of the deformations of the landscape, burning from its roots in certain parts of the region; their grandparents saw apocalyptic scenes of forests slowly dying; they saw smoking trees, as if cursed by volcanic gods, until all of them got charred and fossilized, submerged in water, like improvised ghostly figures in the middle of a wetland.

The sacrificed nature left an area that fully complies with the neo-liberal economic model, transforming that region into the most productive in Chile after the copper belt in the north. It created an exaggerated feeling of admiration among the Chileans for the settlers and the German establishment there, a machine that never stopped, to the detriment of their fellow inhabitants living and working in the same fields and geographical area. There is, however, a shared responsibility due to the deep social division fuelled by the psychosocial weakness of the Chileans in the area. They feel subjected to the powerful settlers in an absurd manner. My mother used to tell an anecdote about what she called “poor fools”. The story went like this: one day two young German girls took a rural bus, which was rather unusual. Immediately two older women rose and gave their places to the girls, who perhaps were their employers. But the situation was an absurd and pathetic act of submission.

In the anthropological timeline of the region, Huilliche and Cunco peoples were established there. [12] Later on mestizo (Chilean) peoples arrived from northern Chile, and finally German settlers established in the area. Hidden traces of these occupations still exist underground, archaeological sites well protected by layers of cultivated earth. Locals in Ñadi collect remains of pottery and tools while planting potatoes. Those traces are treasured by the people as enigmatic testimonies of the past, like the great archaeological site of Monte Verde, [13] the oldest in the Americas. These facts are no less important if we think of the indigenous influence in the different strata of the Southern culture: food, phonetic influence in the spoken language, and regional customs. In addition, the German immigration and the influence of the late presence of Spanish colonizers in Chiloé also added to it. In spite of the indifference of the settlers, the local culture absorbed those elements to build a multicultural situation and a peculiar, hybrid territory we now call “*cultura chilota*”(culture of Chiloé). Although the essence of this cultural concept is mainly based in Chiloé Island, it has also been transferred to the continent due to its permanent movement through the years. In the seventies I could see sailboats built by local carpenters [14] gathering in the small bay of Angelmó to market their farm and marine products. These contacts between the island and the continent were intense and extended, which explains the exchange of uses and customs.

[5] Francis Galton (1822-1911) believed in the artificial selection of humans to improve the breed, and for the first time he formalized the theory of “eugenics”. He wrote: “... *the ideal of improving the human species is an aspiration so noble that may well be elevated to the status of a religious obligation...*” Eugenics (a term coined by Galton himself around 1844) includes both positive and negative measures to control descendants. The negative measures prohibit the reproduction of mad and feeble-minded people, confirmed criminals and paupers. Professor Alejandra Massone, “*Eugenics: ideology, politics and science vs. human dignity*,” page 3.

[6] The enormous racial variability in Latin America, both ethnic and cultural, permitted eugenicists to promote European schemes, enhance the development and superiority of the white race, which was seen as carrying desirable values. It should implement racial whitening via miscegenation. These concepts became predominant among eugenicist societies in Peru, Brazil and Mexico.

[7] In the 1960s and 70s an extensive agrarian reform took place in rural Chile, triggered by human and social decadence, a dramatic fall in land productivity and massive migration of workers to the city of Santiago. Expropriations all over the country reached more than three million hectares. The following government of Salvador Allende intensified the process of expropriations, doubling that figure. After 400 years the era of huge estates in rural Chile came to an end.

[8] *Minimum wage*, a euphemistic legal expression meaning a very low wage under a law that allows the persistence of big differences of income between big land owners and their workers. This system is discussed extensively year after year, to no end.

[9] The lowest wages and less protected social and health working conditions are found in rural Chile, where dangerous pollutants and unhealthy environment are common.

[10] Thirteen Mapuche people were instantly killed, and two died a few days afterwards, 15 people in total, without charges or trial.

[11] The Treasury registered under its name, as untitled domain, much of the Mapuche and Huilliche lands, leaving only some remnant indigenous property by the sea, where

The cultural influence of Chiloé expanded all over the South: *mingas* (a collective voluntary effort with a social welfare purpose), house dragging, [15] potato harvesting, cider making, among others, are common collective activities, typical of the zone.

The attractive regional architecture is another example of this cultural exchange. Houses self-built by improvised and self-taught local builders were a copy of German models and patterns, adapting them to their own original concept of decorations and details. This developed a different and rather original architecture in the zone.

The Spanish heritage is also important in the building of churches in the South. Cathedrals made of wood exhibit their clean and simple architecture. They are similar in the German areas, although here they have a distinct gothic style in their arches and windows, but keep basically the same patterns and artisanal techniques suitable for wood.

In this place, reality and fantasy converge. “Magic Realism” [16], mythology and empirical knowledge, result in an unusual technical, social and cultural development, which persists with the strength of its ancestral traditions, autonomy and successful permanence. Everyday developments and the natural environment put down several layers which can be reached as dimensions of a parallel world; mythology can be a shelter and a protection behind its narrative codes, or create its own curative systems for sick people [17] under the premise: *There are no diseases, but sick people.*

My mother never visited a doctor in her childhood. She didn’t go to school. In her lifetime she suffered the death of two of her sisters. She survived nonetheless; there was no feeling of abandonment or orphanhood. In the country there was a community centre of alternative medicine and social work. This way the South survived for more than 200 years without allopathic medicine or State assistance. It is therefore understandable that there was a lack of Chilean patriotic feeling in a zone that had learned to defend itself with its own means. In the specific case of Chiloé Island this extreme disconnection and dissociation from the Republic led to the aspiration of self-proclaiming an “Independent Republic of Chiloé”. [18]

My grandfather told us that his father and uncles fled when Carabineros (police force) started snaring young peasants to enlist them for a war with Peru and Bolivia (1879). One of them could not escape and they never saw him again. This situation explains why there was an artificial nation, created on the basis of an inconsistent identity and a forced affiliation, especially in the South.

My grandmother understood nature and knew how to live with it, according to her ancestral feelings, her empiric knowledge and the rules of behavior prevailing through life experience and myths. There was an inventory of varied and different things: powerful and versatile witches, healers who practiced personal rituals or powers immanent in the elements. There was a varied fauna in the jungle, like pumas, and other rather strange animals, like the *tué-tué* [19] or the *camahueto*. [20] My grandmother could identify places where this mythological animal passed by leaving behind indelible footprints: a long and deep cleft in the creek bed. She was an exiled *machi* (a healer) because of her marriage with a mixed race man, and knew the power of herbs. The ancient wisdom of Mapuches and the oral traditions were a valuable acquisition to our imagination [21] in this land. I believe those were times when daily events collapsed before questions posed by the desire for a fantastic comprehension of the world.

local families had their homes and orchards. Everything else, inland areas of ancient Indian occupation for farming, grazing and firewood collection, were declared State property.

On February 14th 1896 the Executive passed a law by which the State was obliged to hand over 100,000 hectares in the province to an individual in order to colonize the territory with foreigners. For this purpose the State declared as its own around three quarters of the Department of Castro and 12 islands of the archipelago. Thus, much of the Mapuche and Huilliche territories became State property, and the legal titles granted by the Spanish Crown were ignored. *Los Huilliches del Sur: El Territorio Huilliche en Valdivia y Osorno*, chapter 3.

[12] Huilliches, in the Mapudungun language, means “people of the south”, and they live in the southern part of Araucanía. When Spanish conquerors arrived, Huilliches lived in the valley extending from Toltén River to central Chiloé, now provinces of Valdivia, Ranco, Osorno, Llanquihue and Chiloé.

Cuncos or Juncos were a people living in the Chilean southern maritime border between Valdivia and Maullín. They were part of sedentary, coastal Mapuche peoples, Lafchenkes, living from maritime activities and cultivation of potatoes.

[13] Near Puerto Montt, in Monte Verde, this site keeps the oldest human traces in the Americas. It is approximately 33.000 years old.

[14] These carpenters, known as “*carpinteros de ribera*” (beach carpenters), were expert artisanal shipbuilders.

[15] House dragging: to move a house over land or sea by a collective effort.

[16] A literary genre implemented by Latin American novelists in the second half of the 20th century. It is characterized by the use of fantasy and fabulous elements.

[17] The effect is that the experience on the stage of everyday life and of imaginary characters and events that integrate “the other side” of this same everyday life somehow become indistinguishable, at least for those of us who are not familiar with these games of language. So, myths and legends of Chiloé, as discursive practice, cause a destabilizing effect in the epistemological assurances of Western rationality and of the image of reality it projects and legitimizes.

[18]

“At the beginning of the 19th century there appeared to be little in common between Chileans and the people of Chiloé. For two hundred years they had been separated, because of the geographical distance and the stubborn presence of the Arauco people. And later, because the archipelago had been a dependency of the Viceroyalty of Peru since 1768. Isolated and almost under siege, the people of Chiloé created their own world, with almost no contacts with the outer world, in an original existence very much associated with the Spanish character of those years, so attached to its sixteen century foundation mentality. So, the people of Chiloe had its own identity in the eighteenth century.” Montiel, Dante, and Urbina Burgos, Rodolfo. “*Período Independentista. Los Chilotes Defensores del Rey*”.

[19]

The *Tué Tué* or *Chonchón*, a creature in Mapuche mythology, is a strange bird with grey feathers and a horrific human head, an evil presence much feared in rural areas.

[20]

Camahueto is a mythological animal similar to a sea goat, with a horn in its head, like the unicorn. It can only be captured by a witch. Its horn has medicinal properties in the hands of a healer. They say that this creature can explain the collapse of lands and the formation of rivers, streams and the like.

[21]

It is in fact a way of imagining the territory, a way originally settled in the oral language, which cancels the urgency, and perhaps the need, to elaborate an “objective” explanation, capable of being tested from the standpoint of rational experience, according to a criteria that – though not strictly scientific – can organize empirical knowledge, by adjusting it to a possible positive verification.