The brighter side of the indigenous renaissance (Part 2)

Guillaume Boccara
Besides this «horizontal» redefinition of their territory, indigenous intellectuals have been contesting the capitalist conception of the land in a much deeper and radical manner. For Wallmapu not only refers to what I would call the «sheer materiality» of the earth but to a complex system of representations regarding the universe and the living entities that inhabit its different layers and domains. If I had to picture it, I would say that the Wallmapu is actually conceived of by Mapuche people both horizontally and vertically, that is, in its superficiality and thickness. As early as the seventeenth century, and despite its ethnocentric bias and demonizing tone, the colonial documentation recorded the fact that indigenous peoples believed in the existence of a multilayered world peopled by different kind of living entities. From the late nineteenth century onwards, ethnographical research has been studying indigenous symbolism and system of representations in greater depth, showing that Mapuche people effectively divide the world into several intercommunicated spheres inhabited by a great diversity of beings. However, it is only very recently that indigenous intellectuals have been offering a stable, written, and thorough version of the Mapuche conceptualization of the universe. Let us therefore briefly examine what is slowly becoming the Mapuche standard version of the cosmos.

In order to do so, I will use a set of documents written by four renowned Mapuche intellectuals and knowledgeable persons. It is important to mention that this documentation was specially elaborated for a series of workshops in intercultural health that were held in the southern province of Cautín as part of the Chilean State’s new indigenist policy and through an ethnodevelopment program called Origins. It is also worth emphasizing that the information condensed into those booklets is the result of many years of research by indigenous intellectuals and anthropologists.
As I alluded above, the territory as conceived of by indigenous peoples and presented in those pamphlets is not limited to political borders or administrative districts. First of all, the Wallmapu, or indigenous world as a whole, is made out of different spaces. Second of all, it is composed of multiple places. Third of all, those spaces are peopled by a huge number of beings and entities that communicate and circulate through those specific places. Let us take a closer look at this Mapuche conceptualization of the universe in order to see how it actually challenges the capitalist dominant view of the planet Earth.

According to the general definition given in the booklet entitled *Mapuche Religiosity and Cosmovision*, the Wallmapu is «the whole universe, the cosmos, everything that is material and immaterial, tangible and intangible»⁴. This whole is peopled by powers (newen), each person (che) being connected with one of those newen. Another central feature of this universe is that «it is alive, always in movement, and totally active»⁵. According to this spiritual perspective, the Wallmapu is made out of four spaces: 1) the Wenu Mapu which means the Upper Land; 2) the Ragiñ Wenu Mapu, Middle Land or zone that mediates between domains 1 and 3; 3) the Pülli Mapu which is the space where we, human beings, live⁶; 4) the Miñche Mapu, or the Under World (see Diagram 1). Every single person (che) belongs to a newen from which he or she traces a territorial kinship or tuwün (Diagram 2). We, as human beings, are also connected to our ancestors through blood, and that works as another kind of kinship called küpan. Eventually, the authors of those documents contend, the che are not to govern the earth but to manage it. The different spaces that compose the wallmapu communicate through places like swamps, bushes, hills, rivers, etc. In each of those places dwells a genius (gen) that takes care of its perpetuation. These gen assess the human behavior in accordance with three principles: 1) respect other che and spaces (Xükawün); 2) express affection towards other people (Eukuwün); 3) do not tease or make fun of other che and entities (Yamüwün). What is interesting to highlight here, is that those patterns of behavior apply, on the one hand, to the relationship between human beings and, on the other, to the relations between a che and what we call «Nature». The core principle that governs here is, as these authors put it: «respect and be respected». If the Azmapu (i.e. the Mapuche norms and costumes) is not followed and the rule of reciprocity not abided by, balance will be ruptured and disease will erupt. Let us eventually observe that it is through the modification of the state of consciousness through vision, trance, dream, disease or death that one is able to circulate from one sphere of the Wallmapu to another. According to these authors' vocabulary, if someone is to pass from one Mapu to another, he or she must experience a physical or mental transformation that is intimately linked to the potentialities offered by the distinct components that made out a person (soul, body, spirit, double, shadow, power, thought, and memory)⁷.
Diagram 1

Diagram 2

(Each circle stands for a Newen)
As we can see, according to this conceptualization of the cosmos, the land or pülli is nothing but a small piece of the universe. Besides that, it is intimately connected with the other parts or mapu and is inhabited by persons or che whose behavior is permanently under the genius' assessment. The universe is therefore defined in political term and appears to be saturated with power relationships. Any improper use of the natural resources result in an imbalance that causes diseases and conflicts. And in case the equilibrium of forces is lost, it would take the participation of the whole family (trokínche) and even of the whole community (lof) to restore it. It is thus a collective, civic and political affair. The conception of the universe presented by those Mapuche intellectuals is also political insofar as it locates communitarian authorities both at the center of the indigenous polity and at the very juncture of the different spaces (Diagram 3). But there is more. For, as Argentinean anthropologist Isabel Hernández cogently points out, the concept of Wallmapu embraces the land as part and parcel of the territory. Therefore, it includes all kind of resources (rivers, underground riches, woods, etc.). While according to the Chilean and Argentinean legal framework, the land is the only protected element, Mapuche vision of the world implies that rivers, banks, underground resources and other natural resources should remain under their control. This shows the extent to which Mapuche conceptualization of the environment is connected with the political project of reterritorialization. It also proves that this process is far more complex than a simple recuperation of lands. For it has to do with the political and sociocultural conceptions the people of the Mapu (the Mapu-Che) have about the Mapu. And in fact, Mapu, commonly translated as land, should definitely be understood as territory.

Diagram 3

(Lof or Indigenous Community made out of families and persons endowed with special qualities)
As we can see, the living earth and its inhabitants as conceived of by Mapuche people stand in sharp contrast with the commodified version of land and individuals impelled by capitalist culture. While neo-liberalism treats natural resources, produced assets and human resources as capital, alternative conceptualizations regarding the relationship between the person and the planet Earth are slowly conquering a niche within the public intellectual scene and the market of symbolic goods.

Another example of this alternative vision of the universe that is worth mentioning is Eduardo Rapiman’s paintings. For, throughout his production, this artist of southern Chile locates the earth at the very core of a revitalized Mapuche narrative. Endowed with living qualities, the Mapu bleeds, suffers, cries, and explodes. It opens up, showing hospitality and allowing people to gather and reach political agreement. It resists and heals the wounds. It absorbs the Mapuche blood spilled throughout decades of struggle and turns it into renewed forces. In brief, the earth is depicted as a central protagonist of the indigenous peoples’ history. It is not a mere scene where Mapuche life takes place. It has agency and impinges on people's decision-making. It is a central protagonist in indigenous affairs. However, unlike mainstream and ethnocentric rhetoric regarding the so-called indigenous peoples' supernatural, superstitious and magical vision of the cosmos, Rapiman’s representation of the universe is intrinsically linked to Mapuche politics and Wingka policies. By establishing a metaphorical and metonymical relationship between his people's social fate and the Mapu’s political agency, Rapiman's production both manifests the existence of an alternative spatio-temporal grid and undermines the apolitical and exotic dominant discourse on indigenous representation of the universe and relationship to Mother Earth. In a plain statement regarding the relation between painting, politics and territory, he argues: «I took over a territory in order to cultivate our peoples' imaginary».

Having said that, let us take a closer look at Rapiman's pictorial language.

Some of his paintings (paintings 1 to 6) give a clear representation of the Mapuche conceptualization of the Mapu as a territory made out of three domains and inhabited by different kind of beings. They illustrate the existence of a permanent connection among the living, the spirits of the dead, and the multiple forces (newen, ngen, püllü) that people the Wallmapu. The earth is also conceived of as political space where trawün (political gathering) took place (painting 7). Besides expressing the indigenous spatio-temporal grid in positive terms, Rapiman's work also pictures a head-on difference of opinion with the capitalist view of the universe. Reflecting the political and social tensions of the 1990s, some of Rapiman's paintings tend to re-signify the relationship between his people's fate and the Wallmapu's suffering and struggling. The impact of dam construction on the Bío-Bío River in the southern Andes is dramatically portrayed in Bío-Bío (painting 8). The earth torment is symbolized in Territory (painting 9). Political repression is denounced through Lemun (painting 10), a somber and sober painting called after the name of a young Mapuche activist killed in 2002 during a police operation in an indigenous rural community of south-central Chile.

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Painting 1 (Presence)
Painting 5 (Menoco, Swamp)

Painting 6 (Purun, Ritual Dance)
Painting 7 (*Trawün* or Political Gathering)

Painting 8 (*Bio Bio*)
An article in a Mapuche Magazine aptly refers to Rapiman’s work as «The language of the power of the earth» (Newenmapu ñi zügun). In fact, according to Rapiman himself, there is art throughout Mapuche history. For as human beings, birds and instruments talk (zugun) so does the earth. And it is the artist vocation to express this language of power and strength thus allowing the earth whispering and roaring to be heard and deciphered through painting. In reference to that matter, Rapiman connects his need to paint to the loss of the Mapuche language. Unable to communicate in his ancestors’ tongue, it is through the use of painting and drawing that he, as many other young warriache (urban indigenous people), speaks the language of the earth, the Mapu-zungun (frescos 1 to 5). «I have had to accept that my own language of the earth consisted in putting colored dirt on a space so that everybody would be able to enjoy and understand the way I feel in this world, the beauty of our identity and culture, and the wonder of our experience in this universe» Rapiman explains. 

NOTES

1. José Quidel, Victor Caniullan, Jimena Pichinao, Fresia Mellico.
2. The mission of this $ 133 million Program that started in March 2001 and is partly financed through an IDB loan is stated in the following terms: «Contribuir a generar condiciones para el surgimiento de nuevas formas de relación y prácticas en la sociedad que contribuyan a elevar y mejorar las condiciones de vida de los pueblos originarios con respeto y fortalecimiento de su identidad cultural, con el fin de alcanzar un país más integrado» (Programa Orígenes, http://www.origenes.cl/home.html).

3. On this particular matter, we must highlight the critical role played by the Center for Socio-Cultural Studies at the Catholic University of Temuco in which indigenous researchers and intellectuals have found a place to investigate and to publish the result of their research.

4. See Quidel, et al., 2004a.

5. Ibid.

6. Unlike other indigenous intellectuals, the authors of this pamphlet contend that this is the Pülli Mapu that is divided into two parts, namely: the Gulu Mapu (Western part of the Andes) and the Puel Mapu (Eastern part of the Andes).

7. On this topic see Quidel & Jineo, nd.

8. See Quidel, et al., 2004b.


10. For more information regarding Mapuche conceptualization of the environment and the consequences of its contamination see Castro 2003 and Duran, et al. 1998.


12. «(...) vencí a la negación y en la pintura recuperé un territorio para cultivar los imaginarios de nuestro Pueblo, hay arte en toda nuestra historia» (Rapiman 2004).

13. «Asumí que mi lengua de la tierra sería poner la tierra de colores sobre un espacio que todos pudieran apreciar y entender qué siento yo por este mundo y acercar a los indiferentes a la belleza de nuestra identidad, de nuestra cultura, a la belleza de nuestra experiencia en este universo» (Rapiman 2004).

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Palabras claves: representaciones, nacionalismo, Mapuches, indigenismo, etnias

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