

*The 'idea' of Mapuche: representations of the indigenous people in Juan Ignacio Molina's patriotic discourse*

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ABSTRACT

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Many authors, in the early modern era, speculated on the origins of the indigenous people in the Americas. The article analyses the discourses by which Juan Ignacio Molina (1740-1829) depicts Mapuche, which constitutes a fragment of the 'idea' of the natives widespread in Europe. By focusing on the theories about their Western ancestry, language, and status of development, the study contributes to framing the representation of such groups and deconstructs the *milieu* in which these ideas have been produced.

**Keywords:** Mapuche, colonial Chile, early modern history, Iberian world, natural history.

En la edad moderna, muchos autores especularon sobre los orígenes de los pueblos indígenas de América. El artículo analiza los discursos en donde Juan Ignacio Molina (1740-1829) representa a los Mapuches, que forman un fragmento de la 'idea' de los indígenas difundida en Europa. Al centrarse en las teorías sobre la ascendencia occidental, lengua y estado de desarrollo de éstos, el estudio contribuye a enmarcar la imagen de los pueblos y deconstruye el *milieu* en el que se han producido estas ideas.

**Palabras clave:** Mapuche, Chile colonial, historia moderna, mundo ibérico, historia natural.

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## Introduction

The theories on climatic determinism supported by many European intellectuals in the eighteenth century, including Georges-Louis Leclerc de Buffon and Cornelius de Pauw, assumed the – supposed – recent geographical surfacing of the American continent. This factor entailed its moist atmospheric conditions and, consequently, the existence of a degenerated and inferior fauna when compared to that of Europe. These accusations against the American nature have produced animated debates in the Atlantic world, which have been masterfully displayed in Antonello Gerbi's *opera magna*, *La Disputa del Nuovo Mondo: Storia di una Polemica, 1750-1900* (1955). These charges triggered the response of the Creole intellectuals who counterstroke with apologetic essays shortly after. Creole authors were committed to overturning widespread stereotypes on America-related matters and the defence of American nature against European detractors. For these reasons, natural history treatises by Creole writers are valuable sources to reconstruct the understanding of American nature by the local elites.

The theory supported by Buffon implied the presence of a smaller and degenerated fauna in America, inferior to that of Europe in its dimensions and qualities. To validate his assumption, Buffon takes as an example the fate suffered by the fauna introduced in America by the first European settlers (Gerbi 1955). According to the French intellectual, animals that grew up in America were smaller and addled, and they have become an imperfect version – a mockery – of those that still lived in the Old World (Gerbi 1955, 1-3). Animals lost their tails, dogs were no longer able to bark, livestock meat was stringy and, generally, their reproductive systems ceased to function properly (Gerbi 1955, 64). In other words, the American environment was hostile to the correct growth of fauna. Therefore, according to Buffon, animals have certainly been generated in the Old World. Then, they migrated to other parts of the globe and, finally, they arrived in America where they later lost their original characteristics and began their path towards decay (Gerbi 1955, 34). Following the same paradigm on environmental inadequacy, De Pauw also included in his reasoning the man. The cause for the supposed weakness of American nature, according to De Pauw, was to be ascribed to the indigenous people. Natives did not dominate Nature and, thus, were subjugated by nature's control, representing a passive extension of it (Gerbi 1955, 4-7).

However, what these theories shed light on is the purely Eurocentric essence of such views and the significant logical consequences that this factor implies. Essentially, to consider the American fauna as immature or degenerated was equivalent to proclaiming the European one as ideal and as a 'gold standard' to which to make comparisons. If the American climate was inadequate, so were the people who lived in that environment. If nature – under any form (flora, fauna)

– was weak, how could those who were born in America (indigenous, *mestizos*, Creoles...) be unlike? Were the Creoles, of European descent, also affected by this physical (and mental) deterioration? Was the moisture of the climate also able to alter or, worst, damage the brainpower of Spaniards and Spanish Americans who lived in the New World for a long time? And, if positive, were they inferior to *peninsulares* or European-based people? These were the key points by European detractors participating in the so-called ‘Dispute’ and the main questions raised about the qualitative essence of American nature (Gerbi 1955). Still, the semantic meaning of the term ‘dispute’ suggests to us the existence of another opposed trend to such bold proclamations. Many defended America and American-born people from such calumnies with apologetic treatises, both in the New and Old Worlds. The Creole trend was substantial and battle-hardened, and many Creole intellectuals were committed to the defence of their provinces from all over the region, as Hipólito Unanue, Francisco José de Caldas, José Manuel Dávalos, as well as many Creole Jesuits exiled in Italy such as Juan Ignacio Molina, Felipe Gómez de Vidaurre, Francisco Javier Clavijero, and Juan de Velasco. Particularly, the tendency of Creole Jesuits stands out in this discourse, for their remarkable literary prolificacy (Battlori 1966; Tietz 2001; Guasti 2006; Baldini and Brizzi 2010), and their treatises on natural history and chronicles exemplify interesting sources through which to analyse eighteenth-century societies.

### **The Creole patriotic discourse or, natural history as an intellectual battlefield**

The focus of this study is not the core and development of the ‘Dispute’, which has been extensively explored previously by historiography. Rather, the main level of analysis is represented by the content and characteristics of selected works that partially emerged as a product of such dialogue. The main objects are the discourses, theories, and hypotheses through which Molina depicts and represents Mapuche people in his works, which constitutes part of the ‘idea’ of indigenous people widespread in eighteenth-century Europe<sup>1</sup>. The works to which I refer are natural history treatises that Molina wrote during his exile in the Papal State, after the expulsion of the Society of Jesus from the Spanish monarchy (1767). These works were the product of many intellectual contingencies that created a suitable intellectual environment for the exiled Jesuits to write such testimonies about the distant territory by which they have been separated forcibly. Firstly, their status as Creoles is fundamental for the understanding of the entire discourse. Particularly, the emerging cultural identity this social group was

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<sup>1</sup> Molina calls Mapuche by various names in his works, including ‘naturals’, ‘Araucanians’, ‘*Chilesi*’, and ‘Chilean’. In this article, I will diversify the employment of some of these, bearing in mind that the correct name among these groups is Mapuche.

developing in eighteenth-century Spanish America (Canny and Pagden 1987; Brading 1993; Cañizares-Esguerra 1997; McFarlane 1998; Cañizares-Esguerra 2001; Rodríguez García 2006, Thurner 2019) played a central role in fashioning their sense of belonging to the colonies. They were of Spanish origin but of American birth (Morelli 2010). Secondly, their role as members of a religious order such as the Society of Jesus allowed them access to a specific kind of high-level knowledge, of classical and European-styled settings. The study of ancient literature was encouraged, as well as the study of Greek and Latin languages, and the influence of selected philosophical schools of thought to the detriment of other tendencies was also significant. Thirdly, the gradual penetration of the Enlightenment into the eighteenth-century societies of the Atlantic world and the Bourbon reforms re-elaborated the relationship of power between the Spanish metropole and the provinces (Lynch 1989; Llombart 1994; Pietschmann 2006, Guasti 2006, Ortega 2011; Morelli 2017; Ortega 2019). Such new cultural and intellectual developments also modified the role of the clergy in the *ancien régime* societies. This factor reframed the paradigm that saw the Church as the bastion of old-fashioned values which, by then, were considered antiquated and unsuited to the new models of reference. And, lastly, their status as exiles after the expulsion and the suppression of the *Societas* entailed substantial consequences in their lives as individuals and as a displaced community, which sought refuge in the study of sciences and humanities as an escape hatch to the unfortunate situation (Hanisch Espíndola 1972; Guasti 2008).

These elements constituted, therefore, – most of – the influences on which the Creole Jesuits' worldviews and perceptions of the Chilean *Patria* (country) were based<sup>2</sup>. In addition, such authors were perfectly conscious of the implications

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<sup>2</sup> The paradoxical use of the concept of 'patriotism' in the context of late-colonial Spanish America would require a separate discussion. What represents the 'country' to which the Creoles refer? How, and how much, the Bourbon reforms influenced the development of such patriotic discourse in Spanish America? To answer these questions, the notion of 'patriotism' should be unpacked, to investigate its main features and characteristics and allow its appropriate employ. From 1760s-1770s, the rise of '*Sociedades económicas de amigos del País*', sponsored and encouraged also by the then-Minister of the Treasury Pedro Rodríguez de Campomanes, spread both in the peninsula and the provinces. These associations had great influence in fashioning the public sphere and strengthening the bond to the local dimension in the colonies. Such associations represented the manifestation of Enlightenment in Spanish America, for promoting intellectual debates on local politics, literature, and 'science' (Ricketts 2017, 31-32). Also, Creole patriotism is intrinsically connected with the concept of the 'American microcosm' (Cañizares-Esguerra and Thurner 2021) and linked to the perception of the natural environment. In this regard, Maurizio Viroli (1997) defines the category of 'natural patriotism', in which nature and the birth soil are the fundamental aspects through which establish the bond to the country. For Viroli, "natural patriotism is an attachment to the native soil understood as a place of memory" (Viroli 1997, 46). This means that the land is loaded with unique meanings, which are then translated into affection for the '*patria*'. The sentiment of attachment shown by Creole authors helped to increase the sense of

and impact of their works in the eighteenth-century intellectual panorama. For these reasons, their apologias perfectly fit in the European debate, especially for trying to overturn deposited stereotypes on America-related matters. In these works, natives were re-evaluated in a new framework that identified them as successors of a great forgotten civilisation. Creoles were depicted as the most honest and sincere people on earth, while nature has been exalted beyond belief, with a preponderant association with the quasi-divine (Lisi 2021). Chile was blessed and unique, for Molina and Vidaurre, and they were firmly convinced that their writing style was deprived by any partiality – although it was not. The beauty of Chile was objective and undeniable to them. Nature becomes, in the words of Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra, the ‘patriotic space’ to fulfil with their praises (Cañizares-Esguerra 1997). How America has been described during the centuries, namely through highlighting the exotic and marvellous elements (Greenblatt 1991). was interiorised by the Jesuit intellectuals who made use of the same rhetoric to re-disclose America to Europe. The way in which they presented the Chilean complex reality to Europe was the gala of the new image they fabricated for it, for its restored and triumphant entrance into the European cultural horizons. They decided to revise and re-evaluate an old image of their ‘country’ that they did not recognise as truthful and, in so doing, they let themselves be tempted by the overemphasis and by the seed of patriotism (Lisi 2021).

In their works, Creole authors explicitly state the purposes that motivated the writing of such treatises. The main aim was to do justice to Chile against the then-existing shallow narrations (Anonymous 1776). Although these works were not only apologias against the European accusations, their *historias* surely contain elements that represent a constitutive component of such matter. The anonymous *Compendio della storia geografica, naturale, e civile del regno del Chile* (1776), which is probably attributable to Molina, opens with a harsh critique of the previous accounts about Chile for the superficiality and erroneousness of the existing narratives<sup>3</sup>. This is precisely the reason that pushed Molina to write, as he states<sup>4</sup>.

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territorialisation to a concrete object, namely the country. However, the idea Creoles wanted to give of the territory was crafted, altered, and imbued by exceptionality. Chile is a Garden that, even if not clarified, recalls Eden, where fertility, abundance, and wealth dominate (Lisi 2021).

<sup>3</sup> The authorship of this work is still debated in historiography mainly between Molina and Vidaurre. However, recent studies (Sartori 2022) highlights how the *Compendio* was probably the product of a collective work of the exiled-Creole community from Chile in Bologna, involving Molina, Vidaurre, and Miguel de Olivares.

<sup>4</sup> Molina was born in Villa Alegre in 1740, Chile, and resided first in Imola and then in Bologna after the expulsion of the Society of Jesus from the Spanish dominions. He taught Greek language at the University of Bologna and was a member of the Academy of Sciences of the city, while studying natural history on his own. The Creole intellectual gained popularity in the European scientific panorama for his main works published in Italian, namely the anonymous *Compendio della storia geografica, naturale e civile del regno del Chile* (1776), *Saggio sulla storia naturale del Chili* (1782),

The validity of his account is based on a straightforward assumption that the Anonymous reveals in the very first pages of the *Compendio*, which suggests the existence of an unbridgeable gap between his testimony and those written by foreigners who rarely visited the places they described or, worst, criticised – “I saw, and I examined for myself, most of the things I write” (Anonymous 1776, VII). This reasoning recalls the concept of the so-called ‘patriotic epistemology’ formulated by Cañizares-Esguerra (2001). In the early eighteenth century, many authors started to outline alternative historiography to the Eurocentric view, to highlight the limits of the literary tradition of European narratives and traveller accounts about the New World and its people. This distinct narrative was a product of the Baroque culture and the Spanish American Enlightenment, which eventually generated such ‘patriotic epistemology’. Cañizares-Esguerra’s study is also characterised by an attempt to delocalise European traditional categories, such as Enlightenment, through the analysis of selected cases. His argument underlines the development of a Creole epistemology that actively involved Spanish American elites and their debates on local arguments. The author highlights how, outside Europe, many intellectuals were involved in historiographical discussions and the ‘patriotic epistemology’ looked for validation of different historical knowledge and sources based on their reliability. In this context, foreign accounts were marked by Creoles as distracted and partial testimonies characterised by the incapacity in understanding the American complex reality – in both geographical and social fields. For this reason, the Creole epistemology and historiography that arose underline the efforts in describing reality while rewriting history from a Spanish American and local perspective (Cañizares-Esguerra 2001).

### Peopling the Americas

Although Molina’s studies during the first period from his arrival in the Italian peninsula focused mainly on the geography, flora, and fauna of his native country, as the years went by and his studies in Bologna progressed, his interests turned to broader themes. In his collection of essays *Memorie di storia naturale lette in Bologna...* (1821) he exposes relevant scientific insights, showing commitment to the study of nature, its systems, and the diffusion of the human population worldwide. Molina was indeed an active supporter and proponent of the thesis on the peopling of the Americas through the Beringian migration from West to East due to the discovery of the Alaskan peninsula by James Cook in 1778 and, in his

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and *Saggio sulla storia civile del Chili* (1787). The resonance that these works had, brought Molina closer to cultural and intellectual circles, also arousing the interest of prominent figures between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries who recognised his authority as a naturalist.

essay *Sulla propagazione successiva del genere umano* (1818), Molina explains his theory in detail. The Jesuit criticises the then-existing theories on the peopling of the Americas, which some hypothesise hailed from Plato's Atlantis, Phoenicia, Cartago, or the lost tribes of Israel (Molina, 1821). For Molina, whoever had the chance to directly observe the different populations living in the Americas would have disagreed with these views because of their distinctive customs and traditions (Molina 1821, 180-181). From the earliest years of the Conquest, animated debates about the origin and nature of the natives arose, and various schools of thought developed several ideas about it<sup>5</sup>. Peter Martyr d'Anghiera, in *De orbe novo decades* (1504) already compares natives with Greeks and Latin. Natives represented, for Martyr d'Anghiera, the confirmation of the Greco-Roman mythology and traditions and they recall Myrmidons, Corinth, and the ancients' tutelary deities (Gerbi 1975, 79-83). "You thought that superstitious antiquity had perished," but rather, it flourished in America (Gerbi 1975, 81)<sup>6</sup>. Bartolomé de Las Casas, Andrés de Olmos, Gregorio García, and José de Acosta are just other examples of these long-standing tradition (Acosta 1590; García 1607). The reasoning behind the construction of this parallelism was related to the religious discourse about Catholics and pagans (MacCormack 1997; Murry 2013). Furthermore, the rediscovery of classical antiquity, first with Humanism and then with Neoclassicism, made the search for the origins a recurrent tradition of the early modern era. The reawakening of ancient times, however, has also been used as a legitimising tool to fabricate histories and connections with quasi-mythological backgrounds (Gruzinski 2018)<sup>7</sup>. The link with antiquity makes it conceivable to imagine uninterrupted chains of transmission of images and objects that have spanned centuries. The important thing was to maintain contact, even if it meant manufacturing the missing elements (Gruzinski 2018, 53). This view was

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<sup>5</sup> I do also refer to the Valladolid debate (1550-1551).

<sup>6</sup> On the same subject, namely, the embracing of the Eurocentric paradigm of linear progress and the 'gap' with the native populations who are identified by European thinkers as 'ancient', Gerbi (1975, 62-63) also reports Giambattista Vico's quote: "If one wants to discover the truth amongst what is said to have happened in far-off times, there is no simpler way than to look at the present-day customs of the illiterate peoples in far-off lands, the remoteness of place having the same effect as the diversity of time." In this context, another significant example of this view, is the study by the French Jesuit Joseph-François Lafitau in northern America about the Iroquois, *Moeurs des sauvages américains comparées aux mœurs des premiers temps...* (1724). Here, Lafitau, apart from claiming a similarity with the ancients, also explores the origin and provenance of the indigenous peoples.

<sup>7</sup> Gruzinski gives as an example the curious case that occurred in 1520 in Montepulciano, in Tuscany. Andrea Sansovino, a sculptor, carved the head of the Etruscan king Porsena. However, during the seventeenth century, this work has been considered an original and ancient artefact, becoming an archaeological proof for consolidating the Etruscan origin of Montepulciano (Gruzinski 53, 2018).

predominant in early modern Europe, and it should come as no surprise that this key was applied also to the indigenous pasts. The indigenous must also have possessed classical antiquity, whether it was real or fabricated.

Molina formulates his own position on the peopling of the Americas. Humans, unlike plants, have the “locomotive ability” that permit them to move freely, he argues (Molina 1821, 175). This factor allowed people from Asia to migrate to America by using rafts or by walking on iced lands, about a century before the Great Flood. The passage, however, did not take place all at once, but in three waves of migration led by different peoples. The first to cross the strait, for Molina, were the *Tchuski*, who spread out to the western coasts of America looking for new lands for hunting and settlement. Then, various populations from Tartary moved up to the Gulf of Mexico and, finally, by the same route, the ‘Mexicans’ arrived after some centuries and founded their empire up to the Isthmus of Panama. The same logic could be applied to the American fauna, which also migrated through the peninsula (Molina 1821, 178-186)<sup>8</sup>. This theory was used by Molina to explain the origin of the settlement of northern America. However, he argues that southern America was not peopled by Tartarian, but it experienced other migrations whose origin could be traced to the West. Tangible evidence of the Western origin of Amerindian people are, for the naturalist, the customs and traditions of ‘*peruani*’ and ‘*chilesi*’ who, he states, are the most cultured people of the New World. Such populations migrated by swimming or using rifts and small boats through the archipelagos located in the Atlantic Ocean, and they settled once arrived on the American coastlines. There, they found a salubrious and mild climate that allowed them to rapidly spread all over the region, where they constituted various societies that later become savages for unknown reasons, such as those of Brazil, the Amazons, Paraguay, and the Incas (Molina 1821, 188-190).

Molina delves into the descriptions of ‘*Chilesi*’ or ‘*Chiliani*’, who live between the Tropic of Capricorn and the forty-five degrees southern latitude, and whose main feature was to be “lovers of freedom, above all”, and who represented “an insurmountable barrier to the Spanish conquests” (Molina 1821, 190). The naturalist also depicts the area in which *Araucanos* live, in the territories south of the BíoBío River (fig. 1). The author does not seem to consider the ‘Araucanians’ as the other indigenous populations who lived in the region, which he often defines as ‘savages’<sup>9</sup>. Molina glorifies the ability of the ‘Araucanians’ in many

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<sup>8</sup> The theories on the settlement of the Americas and the migration via the Bering Strait do not belong entirely to the eighteenth-century debates following Cook’s discoveries. A similar thesis has already been promoted by the Jesuit José de Acosta in his famous work *Historia natural y moral de Las Indias* (1590) (Jarcho 1959).

<sup>9</sup> The term ‘savage’ changed its semantic meaning over time in Spanish America, and in the late eighteenth century it was employed together with ‘*bárbaros*’, ‘*bravos*’, and ‘*gentiles*’ interchangeably as synonymous to describe natives (Weber 2005, 15).



fields of empirical knowledge such as weaving, metal casting, agriculture, military tactics, hydraulics, and astronomy. No less important, yet, is their slyness, demonstrated by their skills in playing chess, backgammon and 'spheromachy' (Molina 1821, 191). As David Weber has noted, in the late eighteenth century, this kind of contrasting argument on the abilities and character of the indigenous could have often coexisted in the thinking of the same enlightened author as long as it remained a useful element for rhetorical purposes (Weber 2005, 46-47).

However, the most estimable quality of the Araucanians is their language, which is constituted "of duals, of aorists, of participles for all tenses, [and] of all kinds of compositions" (Molina 1821, 191), Molina states. Lastly, yet more irrefutable evidence of their Western ancestry was the "large number of pure Greek words with the same meaning that leave no doubt as to their Greek-Indian origin" (Molina 1821, 191).



Figure 1 – “Carta del paese che abitano gli araucani nel Chili, di poncio chileno,” by Juan Ignacio Molina in *Saggio sulla storia civile del Chili* (1787). Courtesy of Biblioteca Comunale dell’Archiginnasio di Bologna.

## The Mapuche language

The focus of Molina's works, besides the geographical descriptions of the Chilean Province, as well as flora and fauna, is on the Spaniards and the indigenous people. Molina actively defends natives from Buffon's affirmations, and the critique to the detractors of America represents a substantial part of his literary production. The Jesuit describes the habits of the Mapuche people in his works, especially in *Saggio sulla storia civile del Chili* (1787). Here, Molina first narrates the expedition led by Diego de Almagro from Peru (1536-1537), then, the conquest by Pedro de Valdivia (1540-1598) and, finally, the consequent resistance of 'Mapocini'<sup>10</sup>. A close-up account of historical events that marked the conflict for the establishment of Spanish rule follows, in which Molina mentions Mapuche's key military leaders as Caupolicán, Lautaro, and Colocolo. The *Araucanos* are portrayed by Molina by the composition of their society and customs, and he widely explores the art of war, funeral rites, spirituality, *materia medica*, and their diet. The Jesuit tells us how the Mapuche are divided into different communities called *Uthanmapu*: the coastline settlement is called *Lavquenmapu*, the name of the valley area is *Lelvenumapu*, the community who lives along the slopes of the Andes is that of *Inapiremapu* and, finally, the high-altitude Andean area is defined as *Piremapu*. Every *Uthanmapu* is divided into five *Ailla rebue*, namely provinces, and every province into nine *Rebue*, namely prefectures (Molina 1782, 28).

Molina depicts the natives by the well-known myth of the 'araucano indómito' (Alvarado 1996; Boceara 1999), the fearless Araucanian warrior, of which his descriptions are imbued.

Le virtudi più stimate tra loro [of Mapuche] sono il coraggio, la sagacità, il secreto, l'astuzia, la scienza militare, l'amore della patria, l'odio ad ogni genere di servitù, la costanza nelle fatiche, ed in somma tutte quelle che formano un uomo guerriero (Anonymous 1776, 120)<sup>11</sup>.

The literary origin of this *tòpos* in the Iberian literature can be traced back to the epic poem *La Araucana* by Alonso de Ercilla (1569) and *Purén indómito* (n.b., sixteenth century) by Diego Arias de Saavedra, who both narrate the beginning of the Arauco War (1536-1881). It gained popularity in the seventeenth- and eighteenth-centuries chronicles and natural histories. During and after the years of the Independence of Chile, the myth has been recalled also by nineteenth-

<sup>10</sup> The term derives from the Mapocho River, in the today Santiago de Chile.

<sup>11</sup> "The most valued virtues among them [Mapuche] are courage, sagacity, secrecy, slyness, the military science, the love for the country, the hatred for all kind of servitude, the constancy in toiling and, therefore, all those which constitute a warrior man."

century historians such as Diego Barros Arana and other nation-state builders, becoming a recurrent part of the national collective imagination (Bengoa 2000; Cortés Aros 2014; Larroucau Mellado 2016). This narrative is based on the concrete difficulty, attested by sources, to subdue the Mapuche people during the Conquest (Bengoa 1985; Bengoa 1999; Crow 2017; Pairican and Urrutia 2021; Alberti et al. 2023)<sup>12</sup>.

However, the foundational element on which Molina constructs his defence of native people is the harmonious structure of the language<sup>13</sup>. Molina is fascinated by the indigenous language, and he fabricates a quasi-mythical explanation to justify such a feeling of allure. For the author, the melody of their language is so astonishing that he presumes they had a glorious and enlightened past, which eventually decayed into a status of savageness. Molina hazards the hypothesis that Mapuche were the descendants of a great forgotten civilisation that yielded to disastrous events, of which they did not have any historical memory about (Molina 1787, 10).

Qualora si rifletta all'armoniosa struttura, e ricchezza della lingua propria di questo paese, sembra, che la nazione Chilense sia stata in altri tempi più colta di quello, che è al presente, o almeno, ch'essa sia un avanzo di qualche gran popolo illuminato, il quale dovette soccombere per alcuna di quelle rivoluzioni fisiche, o morali, a cui v'è pur troppo soggetto il nostro Globo (Molina 1787, 10)<sup>14</sup>.

Here, the dichotomy of civilisation/barbarism – then evoked more vigorously by the mid-nineteenth and early twenty centuries literature on Latin

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<sup>12</sup> The Mapuche were never completely conquered by the Spanish monarchy, and they lived in their traditional territory in the southern part of the Biobío River, which became the natural frontier against the Spaniards. Broadly speaking, in the colonial context, Mapuche embodies an exception for the dialogue they established during the Arauco War at the *Parlamento de Quillín* (1641) with the Spanish authorities, which sanctioned the recognition of their independence. The Spaniards had to re-found and rebuilt many of the enclave-cities in the territory south of the Biobío, which Mapuche continued to attach, such as Valdivia, Osorno, and Villarica (Weber 2005). The conflict did not come to an end even after the Chilean Independence (1818) and the creation of the republic in the nineteenth century. It was only after the occupation of the Araucanía (1861-1883) by the Chilean army, and the third foundation of Villarica (1883), that Mapuche's territories were virtually annexed to the nation-state.

<sup>13</sup> The praise for the Mapudungun language is also present, albeit in a different form, in *Historia militar, civil y sagrada del reino de Chile...* (1758) by Miguel de Olivares (Figueroa Zúñiga 2019).

<sup>14</sup> "If one reflects on the harmonious structure and richness of the language of this people, it seems that the Chilese nation was more cultured in the past than it is at present or, at least, that it is a remnant of some great enlightened civilisation who succumbed to some of those physical or moral revolutions to which our globe is unfortunately exposed." It should be noted that in the eighteenth century, the term 'nation' stood for an ethnic group – in the words of Félix de Azara – sharing the same spirit, forms, customs, and language (Weber 2005, 61).



America – stands out. The theme remains central in Molina’s discourse, who attempts to explain the state of ‘barbarism’ of the natives.

The Araucanians were unique in their linguistic and organisational skills, even before the Spanish conquest. They were able to use materials such as iron, gold, silver, and copper. Such assumptions are demonstrated, for Molina, by the presence of proper words to indicate those elements in the native language (Molina 1787, 25). The process of exaltation and defence of the native language is crucial for Molina, as unquestionable testimony of their grandeur, and he also explores grammar and syntax. An important issue that triggered Molina’s reaction regards an item as described in the *Encyclopédie* (1751, 1782) that referred to the lexicons of American languages defining it as so poor “that their dictionary could be written on a single page” (Molina 1787, 302). In this regard, Molina wonders how a work of such importance could contain this incorrect information. Who could ever believe in such description of “human intellectual capacity” that “does not even belong to three-year-old children?” (Molina 1787, 306-307).

Molina’s comparison with foreign languages takes into account Greek and Latin. For the Creole, “the *Chilese* syntax does not differ much from the construction of the languages of Europe” (Molina 1787, 301). The author is fascinated by such aspect, and he dedicates a large space of his *Storia civile* to describe the structure of the native language. For Molina, Mapudungun had no influences from other languages of the region, but its sound resembles Greek and Latin (Molina 1787, 284-286). This feature is particularly interesting in Molina’s view of the Mapuche for showing the author’s disorientation regarding a language that he identifies as complex, but which has no Western origin. Thus, on the one hand, Molina strongly supports the hypothesis that the Mapuche language is native and unique, on the other hand, he offers a curious synoptic comparison between ‘*Chilese*’, Greek, Latin, and Italian (fig. 2). Although Molina affirms that many of Mapudungun words are original and have no similarity with any other known languages, he also highlights and shows how “by onomatopoeia, or by accident, the following slightly altered Greek and Latin words can be found” in “Araucanian” (Molina 1787, 286). As Walter Hanisch Espíndola observed, the idea of the similarity between these languages might be attributed to the discovery of Sanskrit and the Indo-European language group at the end of the eighteenth century (Hanisch Espíndola 1974, 36). In the comparison, Molina places some Mapudungun words (‘*chilesi*’) next to Greek, Latin and Italian languages, which have similar meanings. Some of the reported examples include ‘*cupa*’ (Mapudungun) and ‘*cupere*’ (Latin), meaning ‘to desire’; ‘*lev*’ (Mapudungun) and ‘*levis*’ (Latin), meaning ‘fast’; ‘*putun*’ (Mapudungun), ‘*potare*’ (Latin), meaning ‘to drink’ (Molina 1787, 287). However, the naturalist remains cautious, arguing that

the thesis about the adoption of these words by natives after the encounter with the Spaniards was not proven (Molina 1787, 288).

In so doing, Molina prepared the ground to criticise again De Pauw's assertions of the simplicity of native languages, and his admonition to the European *philosophe* is particularly harsh. De Pauw, Molina warns, should have been better informed before dabbling in rushed judgments about native languages. The New World is extended, and a multitude of indigenous languages coexist there (Molina 1787, 305-306). Consequently, for the Creole, it is imperative not to generalise when referring to these and, most importantly, not to trust travellers' relations since "a language cannot be learnt by be passing through" (Molina 1787, 306). Yet, what bothers Molina the most about De Pauw's claims is that the American state of affairs was fully verifiable if only he had wanted. America was far away from Europe, but still not impossible to reach, and this cannot be a justification for his shallow approach to American-related matters<sup>15</sup>.

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<sup>15</sup> "Il Sig. Paw insomma ha scritto dell'America, e de' suoi abitanti colla medesima libertà, che potrebbe aver scritto della Luna, e de' Seleniti; ma il male si è, che l'America non è tanto lontana come la Luna." (Molina 1782, 13-14).

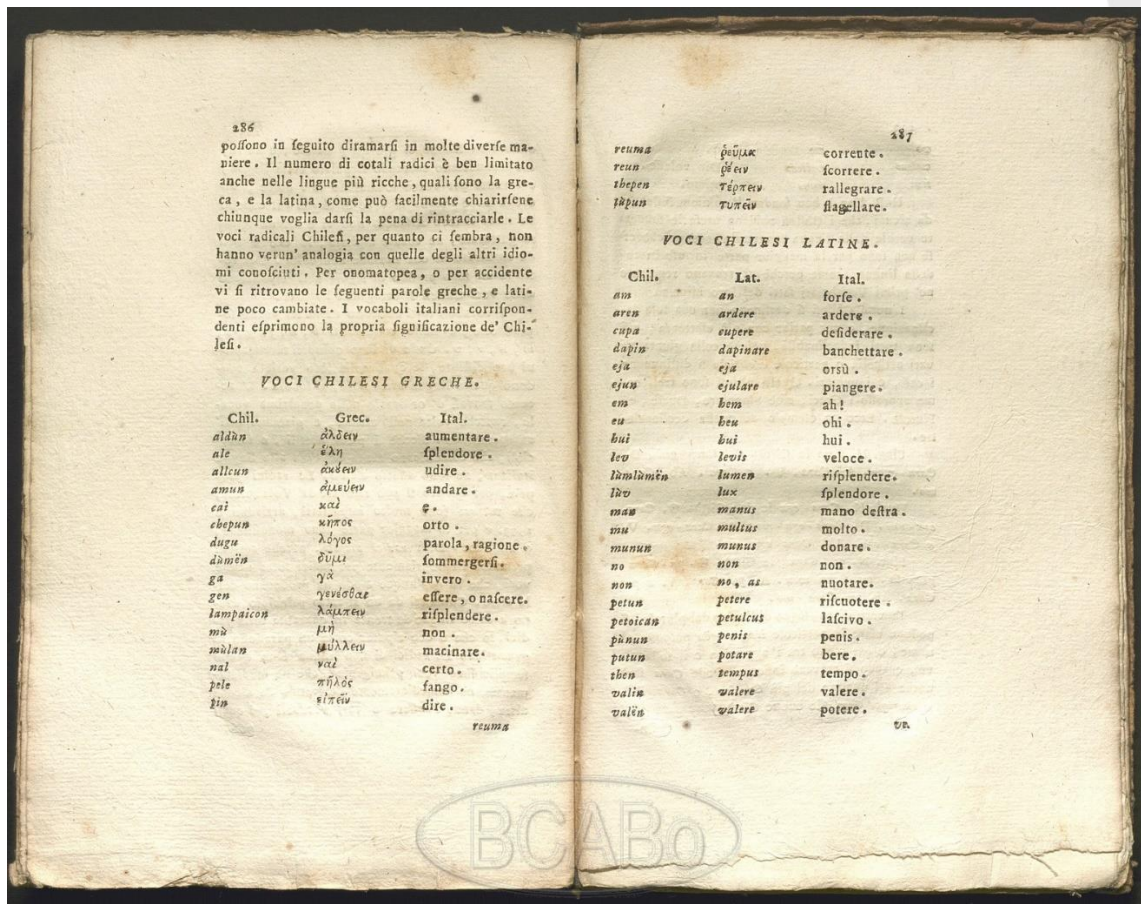


Figure 2 – Extracts of the synoptic comparison between terms in Mapudungun, Greek, and Latin languages, with translation in Italian (Juan Ignacio Molina, Saggio sulla storia civile del Chili, 1787). Courtesy of Biblioteca Comunale dell'Archiginnasio di Bologna.

### The stages of progress

Molina also reflects on the fate of natives, and he wonders: how did they not reach modernity (yet) if they live in an extraordinarily fertile environment? The Jesuit has an answer to his own question. Despite Mapuche live in an environment rich in natural resources, “which should have made them take faster steps towards the perfection of civilisation”, societies often remain stationary “even when circumstances seem favourable to their advancement” (Molina 1787, 27-28). Indeed, the transition from “barbarity” to “civilisation” is not as fast as might seem as a process, and the reason that might have impeded indigenous to embrace “modernity” was the status of isolation in which they lived and, thus, the lack of commercial relations with foreigners (Molina 1787, 27-28). This point is strongly imbued with notions related to geographical determinism and the idea of ‘progress’ understood as a linear process with various stages of ‘civilisation’ as formulated, for instance, by the Scottish Enlightenment. Molina describes linear

progress in four stages or periods, whose apex is represented by the “maturity of civilised life” (Molina 1787, 16). The stages are those describes also by Adam Smith in his *Lectures on Jurisprudence* (1762-1763), namely the Age of Hunters, the Age of Shepherds, the Age of Agriculture, and the Age of Commerce (Paganelli 2022, 98). Commerce, for Molina, represent the foundational element of ‘civilisation’. And Mapuche, at the encounter with the Spaniards, were at the third stage of this path. By saying so, Molina also defends the Mapuche people against the affirmations of William Robertson: “Dr Robertson, therefore, have may over-generalised his ideas, placing them in the role of the Hunters. A profession which they perhaps did not ever embrace, but only at the beginning of their settlement in Chile” (Molina 1787, 16-17). Successively, due to the unfruitful hunting activity which was scarce for the inherent conditions of the Chilean environment, they soon turned to agriculture, which caused them to pass “by necessity, and not by choice” into the third stage of ‘civilisation’ (Molina 1787, 17).

Yet, even if Molina considers ‘Chilesi’ as ‘barbarian’, he describes them as superior compared to other native populations of the region, whom he believes to be warmongers and uncivilised. Despite what has been said about indigenous people in Buffon’s works, and unlike many other populations of the New World, the Mapuche did not alter their physical appearance for cultural reasons, which would make them, according to Molina, superior to other groups of the region (Molina 1787, 9-10). This reason, among many, makes the Mapuche unique and ‘cultured’.

Malgrado la generale ignoranza, che regna fra di loro, tuttavolta coltivano con buon successo la retorica, la poesia, e la medicina per quanto queste facoltà si possano acquistare colla pratica, e coll’osservazione, poichè finora non hanno libri (Anonymous 1776, 93)<sup>16</sup>.

The author, therefore, recognises the Mapuche’s arts and skills to a certain extent, while also underling the difference from Europe – namely, the lack of proper books. Natives did not know how to read or write, and they did not want to learn because of their repulsion for “all things that they see performed by Europeans, or rather because they are still dominated by the wild genius that despises all that” (Anonymous 1776, 93). Nevertheless, *araucanos* are characterised by another remarkable skill for the author, which he analyses through the study of their numeral system. Although Mapuche lives in a barbarian status, according to Molina, their cleverness is outstanding because of their ability to count to one

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<sup>16</sup> “In spite of the general ignorance that reigns among them, they still successfully cultivate rhetoric, poetry, and medicine, insofar as these faculties can be acquired by practice and observation, since they do not have any books.”



thousand (*'guaranca'*) with simple numbers. This skill impresses Molina, who compares it with Romans, who were not able to count alike (Molina 1787, 28). Again, the importance of the linguistic dimension as an indicator of 'civilisation' stands out in the Jesuit's works and thinking.

For Molina, no people were exempted from the savage state, which characterises the dawn of every society. Therefore, the customs and habits of the "American savages" should not cause anyone to wonder, since even in Europe there were – and still, there are, by then, for the author – similar human groups whose customs and languages were equally "reprehensible" (Molina 1787, 307-308). According to Molina, in a long-gone and undefined past, all languages were initially poor in form and variety, then, by use and diffusion, they eventually have been developed and enriched. This has not been only the fate of languages but also of societies. If, in America, natives were considered savages by foreigners, so other European-based populations could have been considered alike.

## Conclusions

In other words, Molina was actively committed to the defence of Chile and its native inhabitants, and he dedicates positive opinions about Mapuche in his *Storia civile* generally. However, despite the praises, the Creole author still considers the indigenous people as 'savages'. In his works, he does not try to deconstruct the idea of natives as 'barbarian', and he has ambivalent opinions about them. Also, Molina often made use of words such as 'uncultured' and 'ignorant' to refer to natives, as shown.

For Molina, the peopling of the Americas took place via the Bering Strait and the American population has central-Asiatic ancestry, except for the Mapuche. Araucanians, Molina asserts, came from the West and they represented an exception in this complex scenario of indigenous peoples that have been absorbed under Spanish rule. The structure and terminology of their language confirm this hypothesis, and it constitutes evidence of their origin as an enlightened civilisation that, somehow, has come into contact with – or directly descended from – the ancient societies of the Mediterranean basin. Although the sound of the Mapuche language is reminiscent of Greek and Latin, Molina recognises its originality in syntax. The idea of natives as comparable to ancient civilisations is also contained in his works and, Molina argues, the lack of commercial relations with foreigners is what keeps them anchored in backwardness.

The idea of Mapuche and their depiction in Molina's works is artefactual and influenced by patriotism. Through complex rhetoric, Molina instrumentally uses Mapuche people to extol the uniqueness of Chile also for the ethnological dimension. Chile is not only exceptional from a naturalistic perspective but also

its native population is. The Mapuche people are savages, yet their savageness is less pronounced than in other populations of America since they cultivate the arts and sciences. Molina's view is shaped by his cultural background as an enlightened Creole and exiled Jesuit, which is crucial to understand the image he constructed around natives that are incorporated into a patriotic discourse. The representation of Mapuche people, as is often the case, tells us a lot more about the cultural environment of the author than of the peoples described.

Hence, Molina is part of a broader picture of authors who tried to describe what they saw and perceived looking toward the Americas. Molina's works perfectly suit the ontological 'Dispute' of the eighteenth-century Atlantic world for its contents, and his representation of natives exemplifies a fragment of a wider European dialogue.

Nonetheless, as remarked, there are several elements regarding the descriptions of Mapuche's language, customs, and traditions that suggest Molina's sincere interest and fascination toward them. Aside from the veracity of Molina's speculation on Mapuche people's origins and development, his works are valuable sources for the study of the natural history of Chile, for actively contributing to the circulation of its 'image' in the eighteenth-century European cultural horizon, and for reinforcing what – *ex post facto* – can be defined as a Creole patriotic discourse.

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