

Angel Aedo, Oriana Bernasconi, Damián Omar Martínez,  
Alicia Olivari, Fernando Pairican, Juan Porma

Mapuche Anticolonial Politics  
and Chile's Social Uprising

**M**auricio Lepin was twenty-six years old when Chile's social uprising began in 2019.<sup>1</sup> He was born in 1992, the year that marked the five hundredth anniversary of the arrival of Christopher Columbus to what is now the Americas and, thus, the year in which began mobilizations by indigenous peoples repudiating this event in history. Lepin recalls that the flag he wore on his back during the months of mobilizations in Santiago in 2019 drew attention and comment: "What a beautiful flag!" "What do those colors represent?" The flag's design was first presented in October 1992, by the Mapuche organization Council of All the Lands, at a mobilization in the city of Temuco (the capital of Chile's *Araucanía* region; see fig. 1). One of the flag's creators explains its meaning: "The black and white colors represent the balance or duality between night and day, sun and rain, the tangible and the intangible. The blue represents the purity of the universe; the green represents our *mapu* (lands), Wallmapuche, the lands that are the seat of our nation. The red stands for strength, power, the blood of our ancestors, that was spilled. In the middle of the flag is the *kultrung* [a ritual drum] . . . and on the top and bottom borders of the flag you have a representation of the *kon*" (Cayuqueo 2010).<sup>2</sup>

Lepin joined the social uprising together with some friends after receiving a call to join via social media: "everyone came along after they got out of work" to a designated meeting point that had been suggested. This was outside the main campus building of the Universidad de Chile on the Alameda, Santiago's main city thoroughfare, very close to the epicenter of the protests. "We never thought it would be so big," he recalls. In the first



Figure 1. Mauricio Lepin. From Mapuche Territory to the Chilean Capital. Illustration by Francisca Yañez.

days of the mobilization, various businesses temporarily ceased operations, through fear of coming under attack. The firm Mauricio worked for was one of them, and Mauricio made the most of the opportunity to become a full-time participant in the social uprising.

As the days wore on, Lepin saw the uniformed police shooting kinetic impact projectiles at women, children, and older people and came to accept that his role would be to join with others to create space “allowing people to march.” The only way to generate that space, he declares, was “through confrontation.” From that time on, as soon as his working day was over Lepin would often join the protest’s Front Line, a group that came together spontaneously to defend and protect other protesters by engaging with the forces of state repression.

On 25 October, seven days after the protests began, 1.2 million people—in a city with fewer than 6 million inhabitants—filled all the main highways around the capital’s Plaza Baquedano square, which the protesters renamed Dignity Square. Lepin walked toward the square, the epicenter of the protests, with his flag tied around his neck (see fig. 2). He knew it would likely be difficult to get close to the monument at the center of the square:<sup>3</sup> its access points were being guarded by members of Chile’s *barras*, working-class organizations of soccer fans:<sup>4</sup> “I just held the flag out. It wasn’t a



Figure 2. *Re-evolución*. Courtesy of Susana Hidalgo.

planned thing I saw I was up there, I had the flag around my neck, I opened it out. It was maybe ten seconds, or even less, I don't know."

In this photograph, Lepin appears stripped to the waist, arms outstretched, looking westward in the direction of the setting sun. He stands atop the statue, just in front of the sculpted face of General Manuel Baquedano. If Lepin's objective had been to make the Mapuche presence felt and denounce the injustices that they have been subjected to for over five hundred years, he partly achieved his aim: the photo became a global icon of the Chilean social uprising.

This essay draws on Lepin's experience to explore the anti-colonial character of the social uprising, as a fundamental dimension of an event that became critical through subjects exercising a politics of presence. This politics of presence does not only assert the plural right to appear (Arendt [1958] 1998; Butler 2015) but also promotes sovereign self-determination as the underlying principle of a critical emancipation (Simpson 2020). The social mobilization awoke temporalities that were unevenly laid down or sedimented, in territories and population "ruined" by a colonial duress that continues to act (Stoler 2016). The vigor with which the social uprising spoke to and challenged Mauricio Lepin, leading him to decide to play a role in it, can be traced to those same temporalities: a long history of Mapuche dispossession and resistance interwoven with a biography containing social marginalization, political exclusion, and economic precariousness, a history he shares with the majority of both Mapuche and non-Mapuche young people in Chile. A young life full of timelines that were truncated by movement and enforced relocations spills into a present that explodes, allowing Mauricio to rediscover himself as a political actor among the multitude in the struggle. At the end of the day of October 25, against a backdrop of agitation that looked like a battlefield, for a few seconds his body and his flag subverted colonial domination. They did so before thousands of witnesses, on the pinnacle of the monument at the center of the most massive demonstration seen since Chile's 1990 return to democracy. This triumphant gesture draws together places and moments that Mauricio has had to go through and projects them into the future, almost as if they had been unwittingly preparing him for political subjectivation in newly agitated times.

### **Ancestral Memory in the Multitude**

Mauricio Lepin is the son of a domestic servant, who found herself unable to bring up a child at the same time as holding down her job as a live-in maid.

So, at six months of age, Mauricio was sent to live with his grandparents in the *Pelantaro* community in Galvarino, in Chile's southern Araucanía region. He grew up in a rural household, following Mapuche cultural traditions as promoted by Domingo Aníñir and Malvina Nain, his grandparents on his mother's side. They taught him Mapuche culture and history, and Mapuche ways of being. His grandfather was a *Longko*<sup>5</sup> who inculcated respect for others, taught Mauricio how to address other people, and encouraged him to be a decent person while also standing up against racism: "never to bow your head to anyone." It was a sheltered childhood, but it came to a premature end. When Mauricio was eight, his grandfather died. Seven years later, he also lost his grandmother. This double loss left him "rudderless: I lost all my childhood. Everything about me that was still a child."

Against the backdrop of Mapuche demands for restitution of their ancestral lands, Mauricio's community took part in practices of the recuperation of land,<sup>6</sup> which meant he grew up suffering constant harassment from the police. "That was an important feature of my childhood: we were always being raided, because the estate under recuperation was very close by." Domingo Aníñir had played an active role in land recuperation under Chile's agrarian reform process between 1962 and 1973.<sup>7</sup> During the subsequent counter-reform that happened under the dictatorship, he suffered political persecution. Being descended from a *Longko* was part of the ancestry of the Lepin family, and in fact Domingo's father before him had also been the community's *Longko*. Lepin remembers his grandfather telling him that he, Mauricio, would also be a *Longko* one day, because he had an innate gift for leadership even as a boy.

Despite his grandfather's best efforts to protect Mauricio from the effects of his own political activism and the political dynamics of the community, these traditions and memories inspired Mauricio to take part in the Mapuche movement, which by the time Lepin entered adolescence had declared itself to be a movement of national liberation.

Another formative influence on Mauricio came from his grandmother and her own community of origin, Fortin Ñielol. Malvina Nain was acknowledged in her community as a *lawentuchefe*, a term for people who are skilled in medicine and the healing arts without being *Machi*.<sup>8</sup> "She avoided accepting becoming a *Machi*. It would have been a role with a lot of responsibility and would have meant not being able to take care of us." In practice, Malvina represented in Mauricio's life something "much better than the mother who gave birth to me: to me, my only mother and father are my grandmother and grandfather."

Lepin had just started at the renowned Pablo Neruda High School in Temuco when his grandmother died of stomach cancer. Mauricio was transformed by his stay at this prestigious high school, which brought together young Mapuche from different communities. He felt not only the weight of academic expectations in a demanding school but also distinctions of class and race. “There was a lot of discrimination. A dark-skinned young man would arrive and speak a word or two of *mapuzungun* [the Mapuche language], and you’d be told ‘oh the Indian’s arrived.’” In those years the more radical wing of the Mapuche movement stepped up its sabotage actions, which included burning lorries and, to a lesser extent, setting fire to homes belonging to large-scale farmers. In the Araucanía region, racism took on new forms: Mapuches were referred to as “lorry burners” or “forest burners.” Or it would be said, in “hostile” phrases that Lepin remembers hearing, “watch out for them, they might set you on fire.” Far from being cowed, Mauricio was spurred on to a greater desire to take part in Mapuche mobilizations for the liberation of prisoners, or in protest against the raids that were inflicted on communities linked to the Mapuche movement. At this point, in 2009, Jaime Mendoza Collío was killed. Mendoza was a member of the Requiem Pillan indigenous community, in the Ercilla district of the Araucanía. His murder proved to be a tipping point toward more open activism. Lepin allied himself with those communities that resisted the securitization tactics imposed successively by all of the post-dictatorship government administrations. “I went on all the marches. I even led movements. We created a youth movement called New Force (*We Che Newen*).” This organization aimed to pay renewed attention to cultural aspects of the Mapuche people’s identity, such as the teaching of their language or of traditional ceremonies. “We built up a really great group, we got *Machi* and *Longko* to come along. It was a new thing for the high school, and they supported us to take part in other events.”

The politicization of Mauricio’s identity coincided with a doubling down on state securitization policies. This came to a head in 2010, the year that marked the bicentenary of the Chilean republic and in which the Mapuche chose to carry out one of the longest hunger strikes in their history, an action that produced gestures of solidarity from the Chilean people. Lepin took part in these mobilizations, which contributed the following year to the creation of a nationwide Mapuche students’ union, the *Federación de Estudiantes Mapuche*. Mauricio became an active member. “It was a way of showing our discontent. I started to understand the injustices I saw being committed against the Mapuche people, the discrimination, and to get into politics proper.” First the loss of his grandparents, then Mapuche mobilization in the

Araucanía and state repression of it began to open the eyes of this young man who would go on to fly the Mapuche flag during the social uprising.

Some Mapuche connected to organizations began to distance themselves from political activism for fear of being harassed, arrested, and questioned by the police. Lepin experienced this firsthand when he was detained and interrogated twice by the detective police. “They showed us photos taken in various places, in communities or in Temuco, [saying] “We know that’s you.” They would list the nicknames or aliases by which friends or fellow activists were known, and threatened him: “We’ll lock you up and your family won’t know where you are.” Lepin decided to leave Temuco and travel to Santiago in search of study and work opportunities. Like many of his fellow activists, on arriving in the capital he kept a certain distance from activism: “I preferred not to carry on.”

### **Returning to Politics: The Uprising as a Moment of Plurality and Horizontality**

Mauricio moved to Santiago in 2011, but he did not completely lose sight of developments in Mapuche politics in the South of the country. He studied to become a technician in logistics, in a private technical training school, working to finance his studies and pay for his keep. Once his son was born things became even more challenging, as he had family responsibilities to think about. At this time he started to experience what has been termed *mapurbidad*,<sup>9</sup> a variegated identity in which Mapuche communitarian traditions vie with the experience of marginalization on the urban periphery (Aniñir [2005] 2018). A *mapurbe* is a subject who lives in the city yet is conscious of belonging to a Mapuche movement that has defined itself as being one of national liberation.

Lepin was disturbed by the absence of justice for the Mapuche people, and the impunity that police enjoyed in cases connected to the movement for Mapuche autonomy. His sense of injustice was augmented by the death of Camilo Catrillanca in 2018,<sup>10</sup> but above all by the trail of false evidence that the police created around it while trying to disguise the fatal shooting as the product of an exchange of gunfire. The resulting outrage found expressions including a hunger strike the following year, by Mapuche political prisoners. For Lepin, “the whole of Chile saw that we Mapuche are always being painted as criminals for no reason, just to silence our leaders.”

By the time of the social uprising Mauricio’s childhood with his grandparents, his student activism, and his experiences of securitization in the

Araucanía made up a set of life experiences that found echoes in the slogans of the social mobilization, in the phrases in *mapuzungun* sprayed onto walls and in the incorporation of the Mapuche flag into this new cycle of popular mobilizations. There was something of the history of his ancestors at stake in the Santiago protests: “I kept on seeing the same injustices, absolutely nothing had changed. And I compared. . . . The injustice we were living through there as an indigenous people . . . was like the injustice inflicted on any ordinary Chilean person, any worker, wage worker. And unfortunately I saw that those people didn’t realize the injustices that were being visited on them, because they were kept down in a submissive world, where you go to work at 8 and get out at 6 p.m. That, more than anything, was what led me to get involved in the movement again.”

Moving from observer to participant, from spontaneous actor to reflexive one, and from being a defender of the mobilizations to becoming a front-line warrior, Lepin’s history once again was joined to that of the dozens of people who were demonstrating for a better way of life. As part of the front line he was hit by shotgun pellets various times: “I got about ten in my back, one in my head and three in my legs. The biggest [thing I got hit by] was in my leg, because a tear gas canister exploded just a couple of meters away.” This projectile was shot from three meters away, when police violence escalated after various days of confrontations: “The police officer aimed at my leg and shot the tear gas at me.”

Mauricio recalls the fraternal atmosphere and sense of commonality between the protesters of the front line and members of the soccer fans’ organization: “I think a good coming together happened there. That’s what’s missing from politics today, to support whoever’s beside you without looking to see what party they’re from. Say the fans from the Católica [club] are the posh ones [*los más cuicos*], and the fans from the U[niversidad de Chile] and Colo[-Colo clubs] are the most working class; that day, everyone came together.”

### Final Reflections

Chile’s social uprising was a dispute over historical memory. Lepin’s decision to carry the Mapuche flag on his body, and incorporate it into a mobilization that acquired plural dimensions, is indicative of how ethnicity fed class to generate a new kind of mobilization. The same was seen in some parts of the *Wallmapu*, where monuments signifying the history of state violence against the Mapuche people were pulled down. From quite early on the mobilizations produced graffiti in *mapuzungun*, and a group of Mapuche



installed a *chemamul*<sup>11</sup> in the Plaza de la Dignidad alongside two other statues representing indigenous peoples. Thirty-nine Mapuche people later put themselves forward as candidates for the 155-person constituent assembly that was to draft a new Chilean constitution. The creation of the citizens' assembly, one of the outcomes of the uprising, was approved by national plebiscite in 2020. A quota of seventeen seats was set aside for indigenous peoples, and in 2021, Mauricio Lepin was one of the Mapuche representatives who stood for election. He received 1.1 percent of the total votes cast for indigenous delegates. Lepin stood on a platform of working toward a plurinational, intercultural, communitarian, and democratic state that would establish mechanisms for autonomy for First Nations and would recognize self-determination for the Wallmapu, with separate constitutional charters and restitution of Mapuche territory.

The subjectivation of Mauricio Lepin is a process undertaken by a citizen with an ethnic identity rooted in his family, ancestors, and a community named after Pelantaro, one of the principal military leaders in Mapuche history. In the intense days of the revolt, the experiences of having taken part in the Mapuche movement and having suffered state police persecution triggered Lepin's decision to take part in the mobilization, first as an observer, then as an activist. The social uprising brought to mind the pro-autonomy Mapuche movement that he had known in the Araucanía. This experience equipped him with tools for taking on roles in the situation created by the uprising, tools further honed by drawing strength from the multitude during the protests. His people's long history of dispossession and resistance, and his own experiences of social marginalization, political exclusion, and being rendered economically precarious in a life marked by movements and enforced relocations, all converge into a gesture that subverted centuries-long colonial domination. Through this gesture, a *Mapurban* youth made his entry into the recent political history of Chile.

"We were there all day, so that they wouldn't do anything to other people." This ethical sentiment could proceed from his lineage as a *Longko*, something that his grandparents had identified in him, and that he lives out through helping and defending those who could be considered weaker than him. But it also intersects with his personal history of experiencing coercion as a Mapuche activist, and in precarious work settings in Santiago. The social uprising—or, as it was seen by indigenous peoples, the anti-colonial revolt—brought about a subjectivation in Mapuche citizens in Chile's major cities, expressed in the de-throning of figures who represent political violence unleashed on the Mapuche people from the time of the Spanish colonization through to the present. Perhaps these are the reasons that led Mau-

ricio to take part in the later constituent assembly process: although he was not elected, he felt that he could make a contribution to the needs of his people: “I wanted to make the people who live in the Araucanía visible, because I’ve seen how lands are stolen, the forestry companies . . . how most of our people these days are left without access to water, connectivity for everyone, education, that’s still precarious today. There are schools in the Araucanía that don’t have an electricity supply, and no one sees it. There are rural schools that don’t have decent plumbing in their bathrooms. And that’s what I wanted to make visible, to have brought into the discussion in the [Constituent] assembly. As we know, if no one else sees [these things], or if it’s only seen by someone like me, no one believes it.”

For Mauricio Lepin, the critical nature of the uprising lay less in a revaluing of the project of the Mapuche movement than in its revelation of a political system in crisis, a crisis brought about by the lack of incorporation of Chile’s indigenous peoples into the distribution of power and wealth. The uprising also meant reliving, and feeling anew, a period of violence that Mauricio and his family have suffered. The exhaustion due to the lack of consideration from the political system toward the Mapuche people that was evidenced by Mauricio’s entering into the October revolt did not mean that Mapuche resistance to current forms of colonial domination tired or weakened. On the contrary, it raised serious questions about the cunning nature of the politics of cultural recognition (Povinelli 2002), which aim at political demobilization and the commodification of indigenous culture. Standing proud, bare-chested, and raising the Mapuche flag before the image of Baquedano, one of the generals who led the nineteenth-century expansion of Chilean territory into *Wallmapu*, Mauricio’s gesture transcended the ethnic frontiers of one people, bringing into play political signifiers beyond mere discourse. Lepin’s action represented a corporal collective presence that expressed itself through the defiant declamation “We’re still here!” (Antileo 2020), addressing the multitude of singularities that in the social uprising refused to sink into the shadows of public life.

—Translated by Cath Collins

## Notes

This work was funded by ANID—Millennium Science Initiative Program—ICS2019\_025, ANID/FONDECYT 1212047, ANID/FONDECYT 1190834, ANID/FONDECYT 3220446 and ANID/BECA DOCTORADO NACIONAL 21191269, CIIR/FONDAP15110006, European Union—NextGenerationEU (Program for the Requalification of the Spanish University System [2021-2023] of the Spanish Ministry of Universities, modality “María Zambrano,” University of Murcia) and German Research Foundation (Collaborative Research Center 923 “Bedrohte Ordnungen,” University of Tübingen, Germany).

The order of authors in this article is alphabetical and does not indicate a hierarchical relationship among them. They all contributed equally to the conceptualization, data analysis, and writing of the introduction and the 3 three articles in this dossier and should be considered co-first authors.

- 1 Countervailing that generates balance through reciprocity.
- 2 A statue to General Baquedano.
- 3 See discussion of the *barras bravas* in the second essay of this dossier.
- 4 A traditional authority, political leader of a group of Mapuche territories.
- 5 During the 1990s the Mapuche carried out a series of land occupations. These were initially (1990–94) symbolic in nature, i.e. temporary, and voluntarily (peacefully) discontinued when the police arrived. In a later, more active, phase effective control was asserted over territory (1998 to the present). Some occupations were of mixed type.
- 6 The Mapuche made use of the agrarian reform years as a way of recovering lands that had been usurped by the Chilean State during the process of installation of indigenous communities within designated, delimited territories.
- 7 A traditional Mapuche authority who makes contact with the gods in order to heal illnesses and preside over ceremonies.
- 8 A compound term coined by combining “Mapuche” with “urban-ness” (*urbanidad*).
- 9 Camilo Catrillanca was a Mapuche community member killed by the police on community lands. The investigation into his death revealed that police officers had concealed evidence and given false statements.
- 10 A Mapuche wooden statue, linked to funeral rites, that represents communication between our dimension, which is in the middle, and the other dimensions below ground, and in the sky.

## References

- Antileo, Enrique. 2020. ¡Aquí estamos todavía! Anticolonialismo y emancipación en los pensamientos políticos mapuche y aymara (Chile-Bolivia, 1990–2006) (*We Are Still Here! Anticolonialism and Emancipation in Mapuche and Aymara Political Thought [Chile-Bolivia, 1990–2006]*). Santiago de Chile: Pehuén.
- Aniñir, David. (2005) 2018. *Mapurbe. Venganza a raíz (Mapurbe: Revenge at the Roots)*. Santiago de Chile: Pehuén.
- Arendt, Hannah. (1958) 1998. *The Human Condition*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Butler, Judith. 2015. *Notes Towards a Performative Theory of Assembly*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Cayuqueo, Pedro. 2010. “La bandera es un símbolo de liberación, de auto reconocimiento como nación” (The Flag Is a Symbol of Liberation, of Self-recognition as a Nation). *Azkintuwe* [Place from where you can see]. March 7, <https://web.archive.org/web/20101028030327/http://azkintuwe.org/may134.htm>.
- Povinelli, Elizabeth. 2002. *The Cunning of Recognition. Indigenous Alterities and the Making of Australian Multiculturalism*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Simpson, Audra. 2020. “The Sovereignty of Critique.” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 119, no. 4: 685–99.
- Stoler, Ann Laura. 2016. *Duress: Imperial Durabilities in Our Times*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.