

## [Greenwald on Alberto Harambour, 'Soberanías fronterizas: Estados y capital en la colonización de Patagonia \(Argentina y Chile, 1830-1922\)'](#)

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**Alberto Harambour.** *Soberanías fronterizas: Estados y capital en la colonización de Patagonia (Argentina y Chile, 1830-1922)*. Valdivia: Ediciones Universidad Austral de Chile, 2019. 328 pp. \$11.99 (e-book), ISBN 978-956-390-090-3.

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In the 1520s, the Italian sailor Antonio Pigafetta described Patagonia as a land of almost unfathomable difference, a monstrous region occupied by giant men and cannibals. For centuries thereafter, Europeans and Euro-Americans imagined Patagonia as a barren, unforgiving, indomitable wasteland. Alberto Harambour's *Soberanías fronterizas: Estados y capital en la colonización de Patagonia* traces the process by which Argentina and Chile came to exert sovereign control over this vast and little-known territory. Although Argentine and Chilean occupations of southern Patagonia and Tierra del Fuego began in the 1840s, Harambour's work builds from the premise that neither state meaningfully exercised a monopoly of violence in the region until the 1920s. During the intervening period of nearly a century, sovereignty in Patagonia was a "paradox": Patagonia was a national space, deeply important to Argentine and Chilean constructions of identity, but it was also an extractive colony, funded by British capital and ruled by a tight-knit oligarchy of foreign-born merchants (p. 34). In exploring this central paradox, Harambour teases out the complicated relationship between states and capital in constructing sovereignty at both a local and a national level.

*Soberanías fronterizas* is organized into four chapters. Chapter 1 introduces the dominant tropes that defined imperial imaginings of Patagonia. In the mid-nineteenth century, this region—long considered barren, desolate, and uninhabitable—was transformed into an idealized "land of promise" within the worldviews of the expanding Argentine and Chilean nation-states (pp. 69-70). But the 1881 Argentine-Chilean boundary treaty paved the way for a boom in the British-funded sheep-farming industry, allowing a few families and companies to buy up huge tracts of Patagonian land. This rapid shift dashed Argentine and Chilean hopes that southern Patagonia would become a homesteader paradise, and instead hastened the region's transformation into a foreign territory.

Chapter 2 examines the peculiar place of Patagonia within Argentine and Chilean conceptions of territory in the second half of the nineteenth century. Patagonia, Harambour argues, occupied a sort of liminal space between national territory and foreign colony. Racist immigration policies and land laws, which promised favorable terms to European immigrants while denying local populations access to land, led to the rapid consolidation of a foreign oligarchy comprised of powerful European businessmen. In the absence of a meaningful Argentine or Chilean state presence, these families

carried out many of the functions of a state, from developing local infrastructure to policing lands outside municipal limits. In other words, Harambour argues, Argentina and Chile served as flimsy regulatory bodies, presiding over a space that was functionally governed by British capital. Indeed, as Harambour points out, this territory was culturally closer to Britain than it was to either Santiago or Buenos Aires; travelers to southern Patagonia were often surprised to encounter indigenous people who spoke English, but not Spanish.

Chapter 3 details how the increasingly powerful local oligarchies based in Tierra del Fuego and Santa Cruz became enmeshed in webs of political corruption that extended as far as Buenos Aires and Santiago. Although residents of Patagonia had limited spaces for political engagement due to the semicolonial relationship between these territories and their respective national governments, wealthy foreigners were able to use their money and influence to exert political power at both a municipal and a national level. Throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, metropolitan political elites and Patagonia's oligarchy found that they had mutual interests. This led to a bustling "traffic of favors" that served to enrich both groups. These webs of corruption further consolidated wealth and power in the hands of a few individuals and families, enhancing their ability to exert state-like control over Patagonian lands and populations.

Finally, chapter 4 shows how "sovereignty of capital" and "state sovereignty" fused to allow Argentina and Chile to exercise control over these southern territories at long last (p. 273). The consolidation of wealth and land in a few hands, combined with the absence of worker protections, generated simmering class tensions in Argentine and Chilean Patagonia. These tensions culminated in the outbreak of widespread mobilizations in 1919-21 that were brutally repressed by both countries. These mobilizations provided the impetus for Argentina and Chile to start exerting control over the movements and actions of local people in southern Patagonia. In Harambour's words, "The exercise of *inward* sovereignty was produced only as a response to a threat to the oligarchic order" that had developed in Patagonia (p. 265). This moment of repression reaffirmed the power of Patagonia's wealthiest inhabitants, but it simultaneously led to the internalization of Argentine and Chilean hegemonic rule over these territories; even the powerful oligarchy came to speak and think in a "language of the state" that acknowledged Patagonia as part of the Argentine and Chilean nation-states (p. 211). Thus ended the process of conquest and colonization, which had begun with the first occupations of indigenous land in the 1840s.

*Soberanías fronterizas* contributes to a growing field of Southern Cone history that asserts the importance of looking at Patagonia as an integrated space rather than separating its history along national boundary lines. Harambour adds to a body of literature that questions the long-held notion of the cordillera as a "natural border" separating two culturally distinct places. In the case of southern Patagonia and Tierra del Fuego, Harambour shows how deterritorialized British capital—and the foreign businesspeople who wielded it—moved freely across the Argentine-Chilean border for decades after its establishment. By following these movements of people and capital, Harambour is able to look at these national stories of state formation transnationally. In doing so, he highlights the entangled nature of Argentine and Chilean histories and also provides rich comparative insights.

Harambour's work also adds complexity to our understanding of the relationship between capital and sovereignty, particularly as this relationship plays out in peripheral spaces. Harambour writes that scholars of Argentine and Chilean history have long grappled with how to assess British intervention

in the region, since neither country was ever a “formal” colony of Britain. In the case of Patagonia, blurring this distinction between formal and informal influence may provide a deeper understanding of the nature of sovereignty: Britain never “controlled” Argentina or Chile, but British interests backed by British capital shaped many aspects of Patagonian politics, such as banking, international commerce, and land tenure laws. Thus, to say that Britain never “controlled” Argentina or Chile is to ignore the crucial role of money in constructing sovereignty. Indeed, one of Harambour’s most valuable insights is that “sovereignty of capital” and “state sovereignty” were co-constitutive in the process of Argentine and Chilean state formation. The occupation of Patagonia was made possible by state-led initiatives (such as the military occupation of the region and the 1881 border treaty), but these initiatives would have been meaningless without the backing of British capital and other overseas investments. In other words, the Argentine and Chilean states paved the way for conquest and colonization—but entanglements with foreign markets made the occupation of southern Patagonia a reality.

Indigeneity is very present in *Soberanías fronterizas*, although indigenous people themselves are not. Harambour asserts that the deliberate erasure of indigenous land claims was a necessary precursor to the state-formation process. He also notes that the influx of sheep farming in the region paved the way for a genocide of indigenous groups in southern Patagonia, carried out largely by landowners and local oligarchs in their own self-interest. But indigenous voices and actions rarely appear in Harambour’s narrative, save for a few brief but fascinating mentions of indigenous resistance to expropriation (or engagement in international markets) that appear in the front matter and the footnotes. Future studies could build upon Harambour’s impressive work by paying closer attention to how indigenous people responded to these local shifts in the balance of power over their lands. Such studies might ultimately shed light on how indigenous actions and initiatives also shaped the process of state formation in Patagonia. Present-day struggles among foreign corporations, indigenous groups, and governments in southern Argentina and Chile suggest a through line of indigenous resistance to the “sovereignty of capital” that might serve as a productive starting point for such studies.

Ultimately, *Soberanías fronterizas* is a valuable contribution to Argentine and Chilean historiography that will also interest historians of capitalism, state formation, and imperialism. Methodologically, Harambour’s work provides a useful model for how to write a history that weaves together local, regional, national, and global dimensions, and that highlights multidirectional flows of influence between center and periphery.

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