

# Making Alternatives Visible: The Meaning of Autonomy for the Mapuche of Cholchol (Ngulumapu, Chile)

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In Chile, the Indigenous people known as the Mapuche have struggled under colonial domination and present-day domination by the *criollo* (descendants of White European settlers) nation-state. In the recently formed *comuna* (county) of Cholchol, the association of Mapuche communities *Wallontu Cholchol Mapu* (WCCM), of which I am a member, continued the ongoing battle for recognition of Mapuche rights by deciding to support candidates in the 2004 municipal elections. These elections focused on Mapuche interests that include issues of autonomy, land claims, and natural resources. WCCM's candidate came seventh among nine. The winner, also a Mapuche, is not interested in the kinds of structural transformations (that is, changes in how the government operates) which the WCCM views as necessary to improve the well-being of the Mapuche people.

This raises a question. Why would a population that faces poverty and inequality because of certain political structures not vote for someone who advocates for structural transformations? The answer is that the process of colonization and domination begun by the Chilean nation-state in the nineteenth century, combined with more recent processes of economic globalization (which include the privatization of basic social services, economic growth through free trade, and the primacy of individual rights) have worked to make it seem like there are no alternatives to the dominant system. Other ways of living and governing based on Mapuche traditional knowledge simply do not appear to exist because the dominant system actively works to make any alternatives invisible. Therefore, the Mapuche struggle for autonomy must work to make these alternatives visible and express their potential.

Many of the Mapuche's most dire problems are associated with their lack of control over initiatives and interventions performed in the territories in which they live. A great deal of encroachment upon indigenous lands has occurred over time, which has left many people without the ability to sustain their basic needs through agriculture and without alternative forms of employment in the region. Forestry companies, with the permission of the Chilean government, have taken over Mapuche land and have caused widespread environmental devastation. Also, the river Cholchol which runs through the *comuna* is now largely owned by private companies and the water rights retained for communities are not adequate. So the Mapuche are often forced to buy access to water from recent settlers in the area. Forestry has cleared many native plant species, which has caused health problems by reducing the capacity for soil to filter water, spreading diseases like hepatitis. As well, it has left the Mapuche without the plants needed for traditional medicines. The ability of the Mapuche to continue reproducing their culture has been threatened as they are now denied access to some of their sacred ceremonial places, such as the *Kelen-Kelen* waterfalls where healers have traditionally gone to gather medicines. As medicine is one of the strongest institutions to survive in Mapuche communities, it can be viewed as the backbone of Mapuche culture and its endangerment as a threat to the sustainability of the entire cultural system.

As WCCM candidates attempted to explain to the (mostly Mapuche) electorate before voting took

place (struggling to communicate ideas in Spanish that cannot be easily translated), their emphasis was on a notion of autonomy for the Mapuche that included full political participation, including having decision-making power over their traditional territories and the activities undertaken within it by the State and by the private sector. This kind of autonomy was related to the Mapuche concept of "being well" which is somewhat similar to the notion of "development" but emphasizes living in balance with "nature" and spirit forces, based on traditional knowledge and ways of organizing society that existed before the Mapuche's forced incorporation into the Chilean nation-state. These ways emphasize equality, reciprocity, redistribution, and horizontality (rather than "top-down" kinds of decision making).

These kinds of organizing continue to exist in Mapuche communities (for example, in health practices, the existence of traditional leaders, and ceremonies), but they are overridden by the many institutions of the nation-state that have been superimposed, including regional and municipal governments, schools, churches, systems of production, and so on. Mapuche culture has been fragmented and undermined through these superimposed systems, and viable alternatives in Mapuche traditional knowledge and methods of organization have been rendered invisible. This is not a simple problem to solve when poor Mapuche people are attracted to the small level of security offered by government salaries in the Chilean nation-state's institutions.

The response of the WCCM to this problem is an autonomous agenda that demands a consideration of the Mapuche people's collective rights, not just in the relatively small *comuna* Chochol but in all of the Mapuche traditional territory. This derives from a recognition that the Mapuche of Chochol are struggling with the same kinds of issues as all of the Mapuche; an entire people is being forced to live in unacceptable conditions. This is similar to current international thinking on indigenous rights coming out of such organizations as the United Nations, but the Mapuche autonomous vision goes further than the rights recognized in such arenas and questions the political structure of the Chilean state. It is believed by this movement that, after starting with a rebuilding of the Mapuche nation (in the face of the fragmenting institutions that have been imposed upon it), it will be possible to reshape the Chilean nation-state in terms of interculturality. Interculturality implies not only that the Mapuche will adapt to structures of the dominant society (as they have been forced to do), but also that those structures will have to adapt to Mapuche ways of living.

The movement's leaders put a lot of their hopes in traditional Mapuche political authorities who have knowledge of the interrelations and interdependency of all beings. Not attending to this kind of relational order has consequences like impoverishment and disease, so it is imperative that Mapuche traditional authorities be part of the rebuilding of the Mapuche nation. Because they are political figures, it is also thought that they can act as mediators between the Mapuche and Chilean society and the state. However, now that Mapuche knowledge has been legitimized as a tool, there are no autonomist proposals yet that put this knowledge into action. Such a proposal would involve reinvigorated Mapuche institutions led by traditional authorities that would allow the people to participate politically, making policy decisions based on traditional Mapuche knowledge and understandings of the world.

To get to this point, the Mapuche movement has recognized that the Chilean state first needs a legal framework that could allow for interculturality; thus, the movement has been working to push Chile to recognize its "plurinational" nature and grant the Mapuche the rights that they should have under the constitution. Once the state recognizes the Mapuche's distinct status as a people, it may be possible to move towards a profound change in the way that the state is structured so that the Mapuche can participate politically on their own terms. While poverty is a daily struggle for the Mapuche, their

movement is not about full integration into the Chilean state's current political structure to have basic needs satisfied. Rather, it is the envisioning of a much larger project that makes use of the knowledge that has been fragmented and undermined for so long, to rebuild the Mapuche nation as a strong political force that interacts with the Chilean state through new territorially based institutions. In doing so, they also are part of a larger indigenous movement that spans the continent and the world, with the common goals of fighting for peoples' rights and autonomy, and rejecting the dominating forces of economic globalization.

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