A Contra corriente
Una revista de estudios latinoamericanos

Vol. 19, Num. 1 (Fall 2021): 300-307

Review / Reseña

Uriarte, Javier. *The Desertmakers: Travel, War, and the State in Latin America*. New York: Routledge, 2020.

Leopoldo Bernucci

University of California—Davis

The tripartite sub-title of *The Desertmakers* already suggests what to expect in this exceptional book. The first thing that should be mentioned is the linear relationship between war and the state, which is almost obvious, one would think, for a war in general aims at territorial conquest. Travel, nonetheless, seems not so evident in its association with the other two, except that in this case travel is accomplished by a direct or indirect observer of the war, cancelling the possibility for him to be a participant in the conflict.

By studying British and Latin American well-educated travelers in South America, Javier Uriarte invites us to look at this relationship from different angles and to ask some urgent questions: How in the name of progress and civilization can war be perceived as productive? In what ways can a war transform even that person who is not directly involved in it by changing their identity? Is it possible to reconcile the contradictory ideas of a single traveler derived from their own experience as a humane eyewitness to war, and, at the same time, their adherence to the state ideology that promotes this same war? Throughout his book, Uriarte answers these and other

questions intelligently by offering an extraordinary interpretation of important fictional and non-fictional narratives from the point of view of neo- and post-colonial theories.

The Desertmakers is divided into four chapters plus an introduction and afterword. The introduction contains an epigraph from Tacitus, which sets the tone for the entire book. When imperialist conquest occurs by the use of military force, the end result is territorial impoverishment or a wasteland. But here is the irony that Tacitus adds, which help us understand how neocolonialism operates: "when they make a desert, they call it peace." This cynical irony could not be more perverse. Also, it forces Uriarte to examine the relationship between war and the desert in ways that it had not been studied before in the context of Latin American history. Reflecting upon this relationship, firstly, begs the question: What does peace really mean? More precisely, which Machiavellian methods are used to achieve the type of "peace" that Tacitus mentions? What does it take for a country to achieve peace? At what cost? Is the cost legitimate?

Tacitus, as Uriate explains to us, is more subtle and profound in defining the imperialist motives of a hegemonic nation: "The transformation of the arid or wild desert into a productive space first requires the transformation of the desert into the *deserted*" (2). Nineteenth-century intellectual travelers in South America emphasized this last meaning by highlighting the territorial vastness of the continent and its problems. This message was well received by country leaders as Domingo Faustino Sarmiento, who remarked in Chapter 1 of *Facundo* that "El mal que aqueja a la Argentina es la extensión; el desierto la rodea por todas partes; se le insinúa en las entrañas; la soledad, el despoblado sin una habitación humana, son por lo general los límites incuestionables entre unas y otras provincias". Later on, Juan Baustista Alberdi would repeat this motto, changing its words only slightly: "The desert is the great enemy of the America and in the desert, to govern is to populate" (61).

In Chapter 1 of *The Desertmakers*, Uriarte perceptively discusses the orientalist and seasoned traveler Richard Burton's *Letters from the Battle-Fields of Paraguay* (1870). Burton's personality and travelogue are analyzed in minute detail with an acute eye placed on this British envoy's controversial ideology, for Burton is "both a critic and an agent of the British government" (48). It is worth noticing that William Henry Hudson, whose major work, *The Purple Land* (1904), Uriarte studies in the next chapter, is also cast in the same "problematic relationship with the imperial project" (91). Additionally, by comparing Joseph Conrad's well-known narrative, *Heart of Darkness* (1899), to Burton's *Letters*, Uriarte shows us not only contradictions that extrapolate to

the human level, but those that even go much further and reach the level of the State. Burton was critical of the allied forces and supposed British neutrality in the Paraguayan War, while he persisted in remaining loyal as a diplomatic agent of the British Crown until late in his life. This incongruous role played by England's representatives abroad should not surprise us. For example, scholars of Brazil's history tell us how the British government, on the one hand, pressured the Brazilian monarchy to end the slave traffic from Africa in the 1850-60s, and, on the other, did nothing to stop Brazil and Argentina from committing an indisputable genocide in Paraguay a few years later. How to resolve this contradiction? Like Roger Casement, Burton wrote about it and had to deal with the same paradox throughout his life. Differently from Burton, however, the Irish traveler and diplomat stood in complete opposition to the *Letters'* author. Casement felt disgusted by such a contradiction and chose to fight literarily against England. Sadly, after being accused of treason and sentenced to the gallows he paid with his life for his conviction.

This chapter is one of the richest of *The Desertmakers* in that Uriate weaves together several stories and topics. His exercises in comparing different historical accounts on the war of the Triple Alliance are extremely productive. In one of them, Uriarte makes a useful correction of a false view of this war propagated by Francisco Doratioto. Pointing to some of this historian's statements, Uriarte situates Burton's *Letters* in the right place of historiography by calling attention to Doratioto's claim that "there were no maps of Paraguay" (56). Such a claim, of course, runs up against the cartographic references mentioned in *Letters* and also indicates a clear dismissal or oversight of maps by Doratioto in Burton's book. Maps, as Uriarte convincingly argues, play a tricky role in imperial expansion since they can be used "when allied with state power" to "enable much of the reality they depicted to be remade" (55). Furthermore, "war functioning as a mapping tool" is "an operation that seeks to make visible that which was absent from (or unclear in) previous maps" (58).

As we see in Chapter 4, unlike Euclides da Cunha, who was a direct witness to the last days of the war in Canudos, Burton was not able to provide first-hand accounts of the Paraguayan War despite his curiosity and desire. Still convalescing from a serious illness contracted in Brazil, instead of returning to England or going to Buenos Aires, as his sick leave request from the British Foreign Office would suggest, he went to the battle fields and, once there, found only ruins in the aftermath of an ignominious war.

Readers of *The Desertmakers* will quickly realize how this book chapter is more than what intends to be. It is also a deep look into Richard Burton's life and psyche,

pinpointing many of their key aspects, including one which is so typical of nineteenth-century European intellectuals: his racist remarks. Also disappointing is how Burton comes to identify progress with war by embracing Tacitus's logic: if there is progress, there should be peace; or, progress can only happen if there is peace (62). No doubt this is "a deceptive claim," says Uriarte. The problem is that progress cannot happen in a Paraguay perceived as a void, a nonexistent country turned, indeed, into a wasteland due to the scramble for its territory by the two neighbors, Brazil and Argentina. "What emerged was a silenced, forgotten, and ignored country" (53), showing the vestiges of a conspicuous tragedy.

Chapter 2 of *The Desertmakers* provides us with a succinct narrative of how Uruguay became a nation. More importantly, Uriarte tells us how nation building cannot be disassociated from violence, and in this case, how violence plays an even more pivotal role in conquering territories. Moving from theoretical sources to remarkably crafted personal interpretations of William Henry Hudson's narratives, mainly *The Purple Land,* Uriarte explains to us how this other traveler, now split between being Argentinian and English, thought that "the destruction of the [natural world] is an inevitable consequence of progress" (101). The liminal condition that characterizes Hudson, as an individual born in Argentina but determined to be English at all cost, is crucial for the understanding of his complex and ambiguous novel. Uriarte clearly demonstrates how "the text rejects permanence and stability and celebrates their opposites" (106). Hudson's view of the *purple land* about which the novelist writes, seeking to define it as "a country so stained with the blood of her children" (87), clashes with his other "consolidated vision," in the words of Edward Said. It is more than an "in-betweenness" (103) that nurtures this vision from the author and, by extension, the fictional split-self residing in Lamb, the narrator and protagonist of the book. It is also a struggle that conscientious nineteenth-century writers experience in their attempt to come to terms with their own contradictions, which are never perfectly reconciled. Thus, in this chapter there is that which unites Hudson to his counterparts (in terms of a school of thought), as we have seen in Burton and, again, will see in subsequent chapters of *The Desertmakers*. For one thing, the notion that "a savage land is […] waiting for civilization to awaken it" (98) is replicated in Francisco Moreno's travel writings and also echoed in Euclides da Cunha's view of progress, as an inevitable force, which, for better or for worse, is necessary: "Estamos condenados à civilização. Ou progredimos, ou desaparecemos"

Here, again, Tacitus is invoked to illuminate that uncomfortable concept that war is needed to bring peace and prosperity (96). All cynicism aside, it would be difficult to attenuate the force that other less visible concepts, such as "'nontraditional' imperialism" (92) or "informal empire" (86), have in Hudson's narrative, because these concepts tower over the humane and sensible lessons readers learn from him.

The central piece of Chapter 3, the longest in *The Desertmakers*, is Uriarte's critical reading of three books by the Argentinian explorer Francisco Moreno: *Viaje a la Patagonia Austral* (1879), *Reminiscencias* (1942), and *Apuntes preliminares* (1897). In this very stimulating interpretation of Moreno's trip (1876-77) and travel accounts, Uriarte wastes no time in getting to the main problems found in them. And there are many problems. One of them is Moreno's attempt to hide past and present wars in his writing, by not naming any conflicts between the indigenous peoples and government forces, including the one led by Juan Manuel de Rosas's regime in 1833-34. It is difficult to accept, however, that he would forget such battles that took place in anticipation of those strategically planned by president Nicolás Avellaneda's government troops during the so-called Conquest of the Desert period (1879-1885). As we know, this period was, again, marked by "the systematic war of extermination carried out by the state against the indigenous populations of southern Argentina" (127). Another problem is Moreno's loyalty to Avellaneda's regime, which sponsored his exploratory trip and his travelogue, *Viaje*, was dedicated to the president.

Reprehensible was, too, Moreno's disingenuous relationship with chief Sayhueque, in his attempt "to outwit the Tehuelches and convince them of his friendly intentions" (141). No less censurable is the Argentine traveler's renaming gesture when he crossed Patagonia and his belief that engaging in "ceremonies of possession" would guarantee more territorial gains for his country. Like Christopher Columbus, Moreno acted as if he were "discovering" new land and calculated that his deeds would ultimately benefit him politically. Uriarte makes this point very clearly: by emulating another problematic explorer, David Livingstone, Moreno feels invested in the "monarch-of-all-I-survey" power.

Moreno's nationalist rhetoric dominates throughout *Viaje* and so does his emblematic gesture of appropriation as well when he uses Argentina's flag to demarcate and take possession of indigenous territories. This symbolic act of domination did not go unnoticed by Uriarte, who also sees in Moreno's use of scientific language a sign of authority to reinforce his modernizing and progressive agenda. It is all about modern man's arrival to transform the human and natural "vestiges" left by an undesirable past.

Readers of *The Desertmakers* will grasp the full extent of Moreno's neo-colonialist enterprise once they reach those pages in which Uriarte discusses the Argentine explorer's posthumous *Reminiscencias*. It is in this book where one finds the culmination of all things he considered to be against the notions of progress and modernization. It is also that moment when Moreno glorifies them by exalting a civilizing system of work to combat "idleness," espousing the logic of substitution, which cries out for replacing Indian pillaging and throat-slitting with railroads and automobiles (160). In addition, he resorts to the trope of infantilization as a false argument to "prove" the low level of evolution among the Tehuelches. As we advance in this reading of Uriarte's chapter, one cannot help but feel greatly distressed with Moreno's cold approval of a horrific genocide in the name of progress. Worse yet, once exterminated, the indigenous peoples only interested him as an object of study, an unemotional determination that Moreno made possible by desecrating indigenous graves and sending exhumed skeletons to museums.

In this chapter, by comparing the three texts on which he comments, Uriarte finally substantiates how contradictory Moreno's ideas are. For instance, in his report *Apuntes preliminares*, it is surprising to find the author lamenting the radical changes he sees in the southern regions of the continent. Ruins are the image that encapsulate everything that was lost over the previous twenty years since the first time he crossed this territory: the indomitable Indian, the forts, the whoops of the war councils had all disappeared forever. How revealing the presence of the *ubi sunt* topos is in the *Apuntes* cannot be underestimated. Much less the several contradictions Uriarte points out in Moreno's notes, and between them and what he wrote in the other two books. For instance, after being a guest at Juan (or Yarred) Jones's ranch of in the Carrenleufú Valley, as a way to thank him for his hospitality Moreno "lobbied the government to give the rancher 10,000 hectares of land" (184). There is certainly no ambiguity in Moreno's action: more land to a rancher who would make his riches flourish and less territory for the indigenous peoples.

Chapter 4 of *The Desertmakers* is totally dedicated to a classical book on war, *Rebellion in the Backlands* (1902), by the Brazilian writer Euclides da Cunha. When E. da Cunha envisioned his masterpiece, he was careful not to concentrate on the Canudos War only—at least, initially. For Part I of his book is a treatise on the land as it is titled. In it, he included a sub-chapter, "How Deserts are Made," which almost certainly did not resonate with his readers at the time of the book publication, as much as it does

with us today. Back then, his audience was not so preoccupied with environmental issues.

In those days, E. da Cunha's visionary *modus operandi* functioned as a warning to future climate changes as a result of the common and inconsequential practice derived from the destruction of forests in Brazil. Being an *avant-la-lettre* writer, he established a logical and scientific line of thought for us to think about the nefarious effects of the large-scale cutting down of trees or the deliberate destruction of forests by fire. One hundred and twenty years later, we are now witnessing with a frequency not seen before the many ecological disasters caused by this ill-thought practice he so vehemently denounced. Thus, it was one thing for the vast majority of his early audience to read him addressing this important topic in the 1900s, but totally different for his future readers to watch the widespread and rapid devastation of forests around the globe as we do today. E. Da Cunha's audience has become accustomed to knowing his strong adherence to the sciences, his rational or logical insights in dealing with different scientific matters and humanities disciplines. Thus, in this particular matter at hand he reasons as a scientist by applying the law of causality to the phenomenon he studies: once forests are gone, then there will be only deserts in their place. It is easy to understand his logic, because it is simple or less complex than the one found in the present book under review. "Wars create deserts," states its author, Javier Uriarte who, through a careful and provocative historical and literary reading, makes us aware of the unimaginable effects of armed conflicts.

On October 22, 1901, as Uriarte reminds us, E. da Cunha published his essay "Fazedores de desertos" ("Desert-Makers") in the newspaper *O Estado de S. Paulo*. Again, a portion of this journalistic piece was incorporated into a sub-chapter of *Rebellion in the Backlands*, where the writer, additionally, offers solutions in the following sub-chapter, "Como se extingue o deserto" ("How to Extinguish the Desert"). Certainly, his solution of "taming the 'savage water'" translates into E. da Cunha's "understanding of land production" (222). But aside from his progressive and environmentalist interest as a scientist, it is not so evident why the Brazilian writer became so concerned with the drought in order to explain the Canudos war. However, the real reason for this conflict is underlaid in his argument, which Uriarte cleverly uncovers and aptly discusses in his book. Drought brings famine, famine generates despair, and despair can cause uprisings or armed conflicts as the ultimate attempt for survival.

The dichotomy between Brazil's coastal cities and its interior areas is the thread that runs throughout E. da Cunha's *Rebellion in the Backlands*. The *sertão* or the interior in this case is not only conceived as "absolute exteriority and otherness" (216) but, one could add, also as "extraterritoriality," as E. da Cunha would characterize the Amazonian region, where thousands of migrants escaping from the drought-stricken areas of northeastern Brazil ended up. It is a green hell during the rubber boom era: "a terra sem a pátria" ("the land without the nation"). And that is exactly how the *sertanejos* or backlanders who left the desert areas and migrated to the rainforest felt: after spending year after year, unsuccessfully, migrating within the northeastern deserts, trying to escape from the drought, they hoped that there would be better living conditions and perhaps a piece of productive land, finally, waiting for them in the rainforest. It was a dream combined with their much-awaited desire to feel that they also "belonged" to the land when their sense of belonging to Brazil or their citizenship continued to be nonexistent.

Upon analyzing the different tropes found in *Rebellion in the Backlands*, Uriarte chooses *ruins* as the most powerful metaphor to describe Canudos. It is not a city and, in fact, cannot be a city, especially according to E. da Cunha. It is just a hamlet, which at the moment of its birth was already in ruins. Why did the Brazilian Army want to destroy something that was already in ruins? We find answers in *The Desertmakers* that illuminate E. da Cunha's unique "rhetoric of bewilderment" (238) and his ability to create uncommon paradoxes. The illusory fragility of Canudos, says the writer, was one of its original aspects. The hamlet surprised the conqueror and surrendered to the state troops in order to "win." Winning, of course, is re-semanticized by E. da Cunha to signify "making the army feel ashamed of its deplorable audacity, absurdity, and cruelty to crush the ruins and the miserable population living among them."

To say that *The Desertmakers* is a critical study of enormous scholarly quality is an understatement. Javier Uriarte was not only able to bring together different authors aptly united by the three main topics discussed in the book—travel, war, and the state—establishing a productive dialogue among them, but also exposing us to the complexity of this triad in ways in which it had not been dealt before. *The Desertmakers* is an indispensable book that must be read by all serious Latin Americanists.