# More Than Meets the Eye: A Look at Mapuche Resistance in Chile

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For nearly two centuries, the state of Chile has dispossessed the Mapuche Indigenous Nation of their lands and met Mapuche resistance efforts with violence. The Mapuche have continued to resist oppression, with some groups taking more violent and direct action. In response, the Chilean government has criminalized and ostracized the Mapuche. State-sponsored media outlets have misrepresented the Mapuche, portraying them simultaneously as an internal threat to national security and as outsiders. Existing research on the Mapuche Conflict is overwhelmingly focused on instances and consequences of violent, direct action. My research challenges the dominant perspective on Mapuche resistance by examining nonviolent resistance strategies. I chronicle Mapuche resistance strategies in Chile from the Pinochet era to the present in order to demonstrate how the Mapuche mobilize in diverse, peaceful ways to realize their desired outcomes.

## Introduction

For nearly two centuries, the state of Chile has dispossessed the Mapuche Indigenous Nation of their lands and met Mapuche resistance efforts with violence. Under former president Salvador Allende, national agrarian reform made some progress in returning Mapuche lands (Carruthers and Rodriguez 744; Crago 22). After Augusto Pinochet came to power, however, multiple Mapuche territories were declared forestry lands and repurposed for industrial use (Molina). More than thirty years after the conclusion of Pinochet's dictatorship, multinational forestry

corporations still own and exploit Mapuche territories (Molina). Resource extraction that occurs on Mapuche lands continues to benefit the Chilean state at the expense of the Mapuche (Bernauer et al. 36). In this context, the Mapuche are employing diverse resistance strategies to assert their rights to land and autonomy. The Chilean government continues to criminalize Mapuche resistance in order to maintain control over Mapuche lands and a reputation as a thriving neoliberal democracy (Waldman 61).

State-sponsored media outlets characterize the Mapuche simultaneously as existing "outside the nation" and as an internal threat to Chilean state sovereignty (Waldman, 55). Consequently, many non-Mapuche Chileans have developed harmful prejudices against the Mapuche (Bernauer et al. 36). Chilean media coverage of the Conflict homogenizes Mapuche resistance by overwhelmingly focusing on hostile land takeovers and sabotages of industrial equipment (Richards 75). Therefore, the dominant narrative is that Mapuche resistance takes only one form: that of violent, direct action.

My contribution to the contemporary discussion of the Mapuche Conflict will counter this established narrative. By synthesizing research on resistance strategies, I will demonstrate that the Mapuche mobilize in diverse, peaceful ways to realize their desired outcomes. The resilience and survival of the Mapuche is an under-studied topic in comparison with the oppression of the Mapuche through colonial acts and policies. In an effort to combat this damaging focus on violence and conflict, I will not be including any examination of land occupations or other forms of sometimes-violent direct action.

**Mapuche resistance under Pinochet**

When General Augusto Pinochet came to power in 1973, his government instituted several harmful anti-Indigenous policies and programs designed to assimilate the Mapuche into 'civilized' Chilean society. One such program was Plan Perquenco, introduced as a part of the national counter-agrarian reform. Crago explained that Plan Perquenco was created "to ensure that after land division, Mapuche men would become private landowners and market-oriented farmers" (vii). Based on the belief that Mapuche communities were inactive, Plan Perquenco developed recreational programs in the Perquenco

region to assimilate Mapuche men and women into Chilean society (Crago 180). As explored by Crago, a group of Mapuche youth known as "los Guitarreros Caminantes" learned to create music through lessons with Perquenco's appointed music teacher (201). Eventually, the band began performing songs with hidden subversive ideas (Crago 209). As a mixed-gender band focused on musical rather than agricultural production, los Guitarreros Caminantes were resisting the patriarchal gender roles that Plan Perquenco was created to enforce—those of the male farmer and the female homemaker (Crago 211). Additionally, the band employed the symbols and themes romanticized by the Pinochet regime, especially rural life and agricultural production, for their own ends by writing music that promoted Mapuche cultural values, practices, and identity (Crago 213). Furthermore, the band created songs that advocated for communality and solidarity, and that referenced Mapuche agricultural gatherings banned by the regime (Crago 216). Therefore, the music produced by los Guitarreros Caminantes can be considered a form of resistance against a regime that sought to assimilate and 'civilize' the Mapuche people.

**Mapuche resistance in democratic Chile**

In 1990, after eighteen years under a military dictatorship, Chile returned to democracy. Mapuche organizations collaborated with Patricio Aylwin's government to create the Nueva Ley Indígena. This law symbolized a commitment by the state to addressing Indigenous rights. Nueva Ley Indígena "called for a new institution to promote the cultures and development of Indigenous Peoples" (Carruthers and Rodriguez 746), and thus led to the creation of the Corporación Nacional de Desarrollo Indígena (CONADI). CONADI was an institution designed to address Indigenous concerns and represent Indigenous Nations, including the Mapuche, in governmental negotiations (Carruthers and Rodriguez 746). From this point onwards, Mapuche organizations were hopeful for lasting change. However, successive governments and institutions like CONADI have followed in Pinochet's footsteps by prioritizing economic development over Mapuche lives (Bernauer et al. 36; Carruthers and Rodriguez 749; Waldman 63). While a more radical branch of the Mapuche movement did emerge in response to government failures, the Mapuche did not abandon collaboration and turn to violence, as

the Chilean media would have the public believe (Bidegain 103; Carruthers and Rodriguez 750). Instead, the Mapuche movement began to align with the environmental, human rights, and pan-Indigenous movements (Carruthers and Rodriguez 751). By forming connections with large social organizations, the Mapuche have garnered international backing in multiple forms, including legal aid, solidarity protests, and environmental campaigns (Carruthers and Rodriguez 754). Thus, coordinating social actions with NGOs is an effective form of Mapuche resistance that applies pressure on the Chilean government to recognize and rectify the oppression of the Mapuche.

Social linkages can also facilitate resistance through digital media. As discussed by Hernández, Mapuche groups began to engage in digital activism from the late 1990s (221). At the outset, this approach involved the creation of informational websites to educate a wide-ranging audience about Mapuche issues (Hernández 229). Among the first sites launched was Mapuexpress, a news collective that continues to promote resistance today. Crucially, Mapuexpress reports not only on direct actions taken against extractivist projects, but also on legal actions concerning collective rights and land titles, as well as community-based cultural resurgence initiatives (Hernández 226). Websites like Mapuexpress were developed to accomplish one or more of three central aims: to give the Mapuche a voice, as mainstream media continued to exclude Mapuche perspectives; to facilitate social organization, allowing Mapuche groups to gain support from other movements; and to share and preserve Mapuche culture (Hernández 227). With the emergence of social media, Mapuche digital activism expanded to Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter. In 2018, a Mapuche-led social media campaign attracted enough international attention to ensure the release of the Machi Linconao, a community leader who was accused of involvement in the murder of two estate owners and unlawfully detained (Hernández 235). Across multiple social media platforms, many community members spoke up on behalf of Linconao and prominent organizations shared these testimonials (Hernández 236). Ultimately, this campaign successfully induced change because it contradicted the unsympathetic perspective of the Chilean media.

Subverting the dominant narrative is a common goal of the diverse forms of Mapuche resistance. As demonstrated by Richards and Morales, Mapuche women elders preserve the memory of the

Mapuche through storytelling (44). The women do not only tell of violence against the Mapuche, but also share stories of creation, action, and personal and cultural survival (Richards and Morales 36). Such positive stories, Richards and Morales asserted, are just as "central to how we must think about decolonization and sovereignty in the contemporary world" as are those that relate violence and suffering (36). Thus, narratives of resilience and struggle are both forms of protest against the exclusion of women in discussions about decolonization (Richards and Morales 41). Moreover, the decision to share positive stories is an act of resistance against the characterization of Indigenous women as passive recipients of rights and victims of state oppression (Richards and Morales 32). Mapuche women elders also express the hope that youth will decolonize their mindsets and regain the sense of community that is central to Mapuche culture (Richards and Morales 39). In this way, Mapuche woman elders advocate for the revitalization of Mapuche culture and the resurgence of Indigenous knowledge.

**Conclusion**

By examining several different forms of resistance, I have demonstrated that the Mapuche mobilize in diverse ways. I have identified some communalities among resistance strategies, the most prominent of which being adaptability to colonial or otherwise non-Mapuche structures. For example, los Guitarreros Caminantes exploited the productivist language of Plan Perquenco to produce music with anti-assimilationist undertones. I contended that these forms of resistance often involve refuting the dominant narrative of Mapuche as unproductive and 'backwards,' or otherwise helpless, members of society. The songs composed by los Guitarreros Caminantes accomplished this by producing songs that honoured Mapuche culture and memory. Similarly, the Mapuche resisted through the human rights and environmental justice frameworks when they formed connections with other social movements. Mapuche digital activists have likewise countered this narrative by creating information channels and organizing resistance campaigns online. Through storytelling, Mapuche women elders are resisting exclusion from relevant discourse and misrepresentation by state-sponsored media outlets. Therefore, while violent conflicts have become more common in the past two decades (Bidegain 110), they

are not the only means through which the Mapuche are resisting today.

I have authored this paper as an act of solidarity with the Mapuche resistance movement. Even amidst international criticism, the state of Chile continues to weaponize legislation against the Mapuche and state-sponsored media persist in misrepresenting the Mapuche as violent terrorists (Waldman 64). Scholarly literature on non-confrontational forms of Mapuche resistance lacks nuance. If the focus remains on violent acts of resistance, non-Mapuche Chileans will remain ignorant to the oppression of the Mapuche and will not mobilize alongside them to demand justice. By providing an account of the Mapuche resistance as diverse and nonviolent, I have endeavoured to shed some light on the various forms that Mapuche resistance can take. I hope that my work will help to further challenge the existing stereotype of Mapuche people and Mapuche resistance as violent. Further research on this topic could influence the Chilean public, media, and government to re-evaluate their perspectives on Mapuche resistance.

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