



Library

Olaf Kaltmeier

National Parks from North to South: An Entangled History of Conservation and Colonization in Argentina.

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Andean glaciers, Antarctic splendour, *uncivilised* (utterly Argentinian though) Pampa grasslands and thick Atlantic forests sprawling southwards from tropical Brazil and Paraguay – in short, global or Argentinian nature? Whether Raymond Williams¹ exasperation over the idea of nature being ‘perhaps the most complex word in the language’ holds true or not, Olaf Kaltmeier’s *National Parks from North to South: An Entangled History of Conservation and Colonization in Argentina* brings additional questions in this regard to nation building processes, the (entangled) history of conservation and colonisation policies in Argentina.

¹ Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (London: Fontana, 1988).

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Avoiding the trap of national-natural narratives and at the same time dissolving what he calls the 'inter-American model' (p. 2) which emphasises North American influence upon the conceptualisation of national parks in Latin America, Kaltmeier's approach pulls the arena of determination to a transnational level, highlighting a set of globally-disputed ideas that combined nature conservation, colonisation of 'peripheral areas' (p. 3) and tourism in the Argentina of the first half of the twentieth century. In addition, his narrative avoids the tautologous and unidirectional accounts which have usually enshrined early enlightened conservationist personalities. Kaltmeier aims to describe the multifaceted initiatives of nature conservation, its failures and mismatched ambitions; following the north-south latitudinal trend of the Argentinian territory and considering demographic patterns, the author focuses more specifically on two distinct national parks: the Iguazú ('The national park of the North') and the Nahuel Huapi ('The national park of the South'). At the foundations of these conservation artefacts, the author does not lose sight of their role in providing the Argentinian authorities with tools for the human and biological colonisation of internal peripheries long inhabited by indigenous peoples.

Although the book has eighteen chapters, it can be summarised in three main parts. Chapters one to eight, one trace backstage information, loud civic activism and emerging initiatives within Argentinian society for the sake of conservation, national landscaping and geopolitics. In chapters nine to thirteen, colonisation, tourism and the overall infrastructure of national parks come to the fore. Chapters fourteen to seventeen deal with biological and ecological change in the making of desired landscapes within the perimeters and outskirts of the national parks. Kaltmeier concludes by updating the fundamental question 'what is a national park?' with reference to transnational and Argentinian experiences.

Before we properly engage with Kaltmeier's contribution, his book touches a sensitive point in environmental history and conservation biology. There is certainly a push for more global histories of the national park; however the long-established appraisal of the latter as safeguarding biodiversity has become jeopardised by continu-

ous degradation of Earth ecosystems, raising serious questions about this initiative and its ability to deter global environmental damage.² The book remains, though, inserted in a tradition of scholarship that very often relates conservation efforts with unfair distribution of environmental burdens to local populations.³ On the other side, it falls into a recent trend of recounting national park movements amidst the emergence of tourism, development and colonisation.⁴

The book initially follows a myriad of global trends, experiences and intellectual currents that agitated cosmopolitan conservationism and somehow formed the pre-history of national parks in Argentina. From colonial science (Carl Curt Hosseus) to the overwhelming influence of American conservationism (mostly oscillating between the Muir and Pinchot-Roosevelt poles, but especially under the direct influence of the geologist Bailey Willis), along with utterly western European natural sensibilities (represented by Carlos Thays and Emilio Frey), Argentina became, at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, a laboratory for the idea of national parks. Migration, economic development, geopolitical rationale and scientification of the public sphere contributed further to the rise of civil engagement on conservationism internally. Global entanglements proved effective in forecasting the Argentinian future through the idea of institutionalised national parks; cosmopolitan conservationism gained pace by setting-up conferences of global scope, which provided an important boost for Argentinian-organised conservationist groups. Profiting domestically from international acknowledgement, Argentinian or Argentinian-based scientists could then influence sensibilities and establish the agenda in the media and government.

² Bernhard Gißibl, Sabine Höhler and Patrick Kupper, 'Introduction: Towards a global history of national Parks', in Bernhard Gißibl (ed.), *Civilizing Nature. National Parks in Global Historical Perspective* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2012), pp. 1–30.

³ Jane Carruthers, *National Park Science: A Century of Research in South Africa. Ecology, Biodiversity and Conservation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

⁴ Alan Roe, *Into Russian Nature: Tourism, Environmental Protection, and National Parks in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).

Legislation ensued from the beginning of the twentieth century highlighting the issue of institutionalised conservationism (President Julio Roca's Nahuel Huapi National Park declaration) and forest protection (Law 4167 from 1903), but civic commitment spiked only in the 1910s, mostly with the foundation of the *Sociedad Florestal Argentina* (1910) and the *Sociedad Argentina de Ciencias Naturales* (1916). The latter had as members internationally praised scientific personalities and steered the topic of national parks in a very diverse and mostly *bonaerense* social milieu, generally formed of conservative oligarchs, commercial-industrial elites, natural scientists and high-ranked public officers. The outbreak of the First World War absorbed governmental energies and only in the 1920s did the discussion on national parks come into the spotlight again. Up to the 1930s, conservationism remained largely under the auspices of (scientific) professionals who claimed ownership of the issue; however this did not prevent ongoing ideas that combined purely conservationist measures with national and economic development. Political unease during in the 1930s, '*la década infame*' (p. 59) brought to power conservative oligarchies who were fully aware of the economic potential attached to national parks; this was exactly the time when Exequiel Bustillo's leadership rose nationally, and he led the passing of the definitive legislation on the matter (Federal Law 12103/1934). With this astonishing achievement, 'orthodox' conservationism (p. 73) gave way to a more economic approach that built on the harmonisation between natural reserves and national development. The institutionalisation of the National Park Direction carried out these purposes.

In the second part of the book, Kaltmeier argues that the establishment of national parks in Argentina drew on the traditional role played by Prussian and French forestry, on the experiences of American natural park movement and finally on the classic problem of 'internal frontiers' (p. 90). Although very disputed, this combination engendered settler colonialism⁵ policies which heavily relied

⁵ Fiona Bateman and Lionel Pilkington (eds), *Studies in Settler Colonialism: Politics, Identity and Culture* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

on violence against and blatant land grabbing from the remaining Mapuches. This was followed by the emergence of agrarian frontiers and touristic and infrastructural investments. After the ousting of the indigenous communities from their traditional lands in Patagonia, even European settlers and their offspring, who owned often extensive estates in the area, had to leave the park due to the enforcement of stricter conservation rules during the 1960s. Along with agricultural colonisation, the setting-up of national parks in Argentina included urbanisation measures too. Kaltmeier's pen turns again southwards to where the development of the city of San Carlos de Bariloche took precedence over Puerto Aguirre (later Puerto Iguazu), established for the promotion of the Iguazu National Park. Both cities were intended to become 'national park capitals' (p. 121) and their urbanistic models strikingly differed. The conceptualisation of Bariloche entailed an alpine/cold sensibility which borrowed colonial views of human dominion over nature along with Nazi-fascist aesthetics, German-Swiss urbanistic-architectural solutions, etc. On the other hand, Puerto Aguirre adopted a more geometric-symmetric approach, with global influences including Haussmann's Paris and log cabins in the American Wild West.

The last digression Kaltmeier undertakes relates to biological colonisation, landscaping and economic activities in Argentinian national parks (mostly in Nahuel Huapi). He arranges his arguments around the effects of exotic plant acclimatisation and introduced animal species' colonisation of land and water. He embeds these phenomena into the bigger picture of invasion ecology, the Columbian Exchange and the Anthropocene, revealing (transnational, national and local) disputed assumptions about the role of forestry, hunting tourism and conservationism by the national parks' management. Overall institutional (mostly state level) perspectives laid down the prospects for the construction of new ecological niches in the parks; technicians of the Ministry of Agriculture favoured forestry and fishery, while Bustillo's position at the top of the national park state department chose to focus on fishing and hunting tourism. The exchange and acclimatisation of global biota damaged local ecologies/societies and the prominence of such interests strengthens Kalte-

meier's core assumption about the variability of available influences that informed conservationism in Argentina.

Kaltmeier's conclusion draws on the question posed in 1913 by the US geologist Bailey Willis, who was himself utterly committed to the emergence of the national parks movement in Argentina. 'What is a national park?' (p. 173) takes on a different tone given Argentina's peripheral position in the international order and its gathering of disparate influences from beyond the inter-American context. Borrowing the concepts of 'bridgehead' (p. 175) and 'dispositive' (p. 174) from, respectively, the dependency-theoretical framework and Foucault's thought, the author pinpoints that national parks in the Argentinian experience concern non-linear modes of placing the 'center/metropolis' into peripheral territories, creating a heterogenous non-essentialist socioenvironmental artefact which reveals more than a mere heuristic perspective of discourses, practices, groups and so on. Argentinian national parks have traversed all sort of perspectives on conservation in the twentieth century; transnational and transdisciplinary bodies of knowledges have interacted with the inner (geo)political and social conditions of the country. From the 1960s onwards, the articulation between agricultural colonisation and auxiliary economic activities gave way to the idea of 'deserted parks' (p. 179). The highest price was actually paid by indigenous communities who have, even under the current park administration, received hardly any recognition for their part in building such an admired ecology and landscape.

Kaltmeier praises the creation of national parks in Latin America by pointing up their current role in setting limits to overexploitation of natural resources in the subcontinent. He posits however that they would likely work better if they could heal their 'colonial debts' (p. 180), adding to recent arguments⁶ that propose indigenous lands across the world as more efficient in safeguarding biodiversity. One may argue that Kaltmeier's in-depth analysis of the establishment of national parks in Argentina has dismissed the debate on tropicity

⁶ Stefania Barca, *Forces of Reproduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

and the disputed and belated conservation of tropical environments, given the fact that the Iguazu national park played a minor role in his book and seemed to represent for some Argentinean sensibilities a sort of *difficult, unpleasant, even fully tropical* nature that could have been more extensively explored by the author. Such points of view could be potentially juxtaposed with neighbouring tropical Brazil, which founded two national parks in the 1930s in temperate-cold-mountainous areas of the country plus its own Iguazu National Park. These traits, however, do not harm this insightful transnational history of nature conservation, nation building and environmental record. Recent ecological megacatastrophes, the ongoing pace of neo-extractivism in the subcontinent, the upsurge of political characters who bid to accelerate economic development at all costs and the frequent murders of environmental activists in Latin America show that Kaltmeier's book is nowadays highly necessary.

Eduardo Relly is a historian, with a background in environmental history, history of knowledge, and migration studies with expertise in agriculture and forestry in Central Europe and Latin America. He completed his Ph.D. studies in History in 2019, at Freie Universität Berlin (Lateinamerika-Institut). Before engaging in his Ph.D. course in Berlin, Eduardo Relly was granted a fellowship by Bielefeld Universität-BGHS in 2014. He has conducted research on the transfer of agricultural, sylvan and climate knowledge in the cultural zone established by German migrations to Latin America since the early nineteenth century. After a postdoc stay at Universidade Unisinos in southern Brazil, he is currently visiting scholar at Rachel Carson Centre (LMU München) and research fellow (*Wiss.Mitarbeiter*) at Friedrich-Schiller-Universität Jena, Germany. He is editing his second monograph and his third book (resulting from the Ph.D. dissertation) is due to be published in 2022.

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