Existential Battles: Culture Wars and Real Wars

https://www.e-ir.info/2025/11/10/existential-battles-culture-wars-and-real-wars/

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This is an excerpt from *The Praeter-Colonial Mind: An Intellectual Journey Through the Back Alleys of Empire* by Francisco Lobo. Download the book free of charge from E-International Relations.

I looked the enemy in the eye, and he looked right back at me. I was ready to strike. I didn't know his name and he didn't know mine; but we hated each other's guts. My palms were sweaty, and a chill ran down my spine. My brothers were watching. I could not fail them. His brothers were watching too; he was resolved not to let them down. Only one of us would leave the field victorious that day. It was a matter of seconds now. I finally took the shot: I kicked the ball as hard as I could, but the goalkeeper stopped it. That was it: I blew the last penalty kick and that cost us the match. Because of me, we lost the soccer game. But what it really felt like was that, because of me, we lost the war.

I was nine years old. I was a member of a boy scouts group in Chile, '*Manqueman*', which means 'Great Condor' in Mapudungun, the language of the Mapuche tribe. I joined one of the two wolf cubs ('*Lobatos*') groups or 'packs'. My pack was called '*Gran Rey*' (Spanish for 'Great King'). Our motto was: '*Cumplimos la ley. Manada Gran Rey*' ('We obey the law. We are the Great King Pack'). The other pack was called '*Gurumanque*' (Mapudungun for 'Fox-Condor'). Their motto: '*En la selva gritaré. Manada Gurumanque*' ('In the jungle I shall cry. We are the Gurumanque Pack'). At *Gran Rey* we saw ourselves as the team of lawful good, rule-following, compassionate and honorable. In contrast, we saw *Gurumanque* as a rowdy band of rebels who didn't play by the rules, where brute force and deception were worth more than justice and honor. I have no idea how they saw themselves or what they actually thought of us; we never really talked to the other side. We knew enough already, and that was that we hated each other and that's the way it was supposed to be.

Of course, the scouts' philosophy is completely at odds with such an outlook. Boys and girls do not join the scouts to learn how to hate other kids. The scouts movement is all about getting in touch with nature, with your local community, and sometimes with a superior being in the religious varieties (*Manqueman* was a Catholic scout group at the time, today secularized). Our elders never encouraged any kind of vitriol or animosity towards the other pack. The hatred was something you would just come to learn as a member of the group, a bonding mechanism as well as a tool for collective identity building.

Without even knowing what was going on we were effectively tribalized, remaining at a state of perpetual war with the other pack. We may have prided ourselves in voluntarily following the law for the right reasons, but this was one law that we could not escape: the law of the jungle.

'Since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defences of peace must be constructed'. I will draw on these powerful words from UNESCO's constitution two more times in this study. I already used them in the previous chapter to underscore the importance of the mental gymnastics the praeter-colonial mind must pull off as it negotiates the cognitive dissonance resulting from colonialism and its discontents – to try and make sense of the lingering effects of colonialism in a supposedly post- colonial present. Before finally moving on to the 'defences of peace', namely the rules-based international order (Chapter Seven), in this chapter I will address the very threat those defenses are built to fend off: war. Since political violence, in particular war, is a quintessential instrument of colonialism, the praeter-colonial mind would be remiss not to inquire into its nature and changing character, including the ways it has impacted and continues to shape our supposedly post-colonial present.

Sugar Wars

In a book published in recent years titled *The Weaponisation of Everything,* Mark Galeotti points out that 'Today, culture is a growing arena for contestation' (Galeotti 2023, 171). He is referring to the so-called 'culture wars', an expression originally coined in Bismarck's Germany as *Kulturkampft,* namely a struggle between German authorities and Catholic institutions (Carroll 2002, 486), and then rehashed in the US in the 1990s as the opposition of irreconcilable worldviews about the kind of society we want, with conservatives or orthodox views on one side, and 'woke' or progressive views on the other (Duffy and Hewlett 2021).

It is not just about party politics or one particular vote in the legislative agenda; the culture wars are about profound disagreement or contestation about the very essence of a society, of what it means to be American, British, or Chilean. Indeed, although not framed as such, the culture wars have already reached the faraway shores of Chile. A few years ago, in 2019, the country experienced a deep political and social crisis, resulting in the drafting of a new constitution to try and replace the one bequeathed to us by Pinochet's dictatorship. It didn't work.

Surprisingly resilient, Pinochet's constitution managed to stay in force as most Chilean voters did not like the new text the constitutional assembly came up with. Although there are many nuances and theories as to the reasons why (García Pino 2022), it all boils down to the fact that most Chileans thought the text went too far, that it was too broad in its protection of rights, that it was too politically correct and out of touch with the problems of common citizens. In a word, it was too 'woke', and Chileans – the same people who took to the streets *en masse* only a few years before to ask for meaningful reforms and nominated representatives to draft a new proposal – did not see themselves reflected in it.

But the cultural battle did not take place just at the end of the line, once the draft was ready to be voted on. During the months leading to the final text, political factions argued bitterly over the most important constitutional issues of the day. Incidentally, they also argued about candy bars. In 2021, Nestlé made the corporate decision to change the name of one of Chile's most popular candy bars, from '*Negrita*' ('Blackie') to '*Chokita*' ('Chocolatey'). The company considered that the use of certain stereotypes or cultural representations was simply inappropriate, especially as the product was reaching new markets in Latin America where more people of African descent can be found than in Chile. This seemingly harmless commercial strategy caused quite some backlash on social media and beyond, as a group of conservative appointees decided to bring a few samples of the old '*Negrita*' to the next session of the constitutional assembly, not because they were going to snack on them, but to make a political point that they were against the whole woke, revisionist approach.

A year before, as a result of the 2020 Black Lives Matter movement, PepsiCo similarly decided to change the name and the image of a product that was considered racially insensitive, 'Aunt Jemima', a famous pancake mix personified by the portrayal of a Black woman from the southern US. Today it is called 'Pearl Milling Company', and it is marketed without Aunt Jemima's face on the box.

Another example of rebranding inspired by the Black Lives Matter movement is the change of name of the Washington NFL team, from 'Redskins' to 'Washington Football Team' first, and eventually to 'Washington Commanders', as the old name and mascot of a Native American had been considered racially insensitive for decades. Trump's Secretary of Education in 2025, Linda McMahon, continues to fight this particular battle of the culture wars as she encourages schools to keep their Native American-themed mascots.

When the '*Negrita*' incident happened in Chile, I wrote an op-ed where I compared these developments in the US to the ones taking place in my home country (Lobo 2021). One of the ironies of the culture wars is that they cannot be perfectly exported to different shores without some change or without something getting lost in translation. Corporate America changed its attitude towards racially insensitive depictions of Black and Native American communities. Meanwhile, the 'Negrita' case shows similar concern for Black communities in Chile and the rest of Latin America. Was this also the case for indigenous peoples? Not quite so. If anything, the portrayal of indigenous peoples in popular brands is a marker of identity for most Chileans, as evidenced by the famous soccer team Colo-Colo, named after a brave Mapuche chieftain who offered fierce resistance against Spanish conquistadors. Center stage in the

commercial logo of the most popular sports team in Chile features the profile of a proud Mapuche warrior, not so different from the Redskins mascot that caused so much controversy in the US.

Why the different attitude towards the commercialization of indigenous peoples on either extreme of the Americas? Exercising the faculties of the praeter-colonial mind, my guess at the time was that the US has a dark history of genocidal violence against its own indigenous populations, whereas in Chile, although racial discrimination is still rampant, there was more '*mestizaje*' or racial mixing between the Spanish colonizers and the indigenous tribes, such that today many Chileans can see themselves reflected in the image of the proud Colo-Colo, whereas very few Americans could say the same about the Redskins mascot. Indeed, during the political crisis of 2019 that led to the failed attempt to draft a new constitution, more often than not the main symbol people rallied behind was not the Chilean national flag, but the flag of the Mapuche people (a banner called '*Wenufoye*'), and, quite tellingly, the flag of Colo-Colo, as tokens of cultural identity that enjoyed more legitimacy than the state colors themselves.

Now, the culture wars are only a small part of the existential battles of today, especially when there are far more pressing issues to consider than who's on the wrapper of a candy bar or on a box of pancake mix, or which mascot we are rooting for on our day off. Bill Maher put it best when he said: 'ISIS throws gay people off buildings; maybe there are bigger battles to fight' (Maher 2024, 116). It is to these more tangible battles, the real wars of our time, that I turn next, always mindful of the fact that these real wars are fought with words and narratives as much as they are with tanks and artillery (Patrikarakos 2017).

Wars, Big and Small

Carl von Clausewitz, a nineteenth century Prussian officer whose work *On War* became the cornerstone of modern security studies, once wrote that politics 'is the womb in which war develops – where its outlines already exist in their hidden rudimentary form, like the characteristics of living creatures in their embryos' (Clausewitz 2007, 100). Accordingly, he coined one of his most memorable phrases: 'War is merely the continuation of policy by other means' (Ibid, 28).

It is hard to tell whether the so-called culture wars will eventually give birth to a full-fledged war. I don't have a crystal ball, but I really do hope it doesn't come to that. What I do know is that, following Clausewitz's insights, every war currently going on in the world most likely has political causes that led to that outcome. Every war had its political embryonic phase, particularly when the differences between adversaries or enemies became so intense that they felt war was the only choice left (Schmitt 2007, 37). That is true of all wars, big and small – from the massive inter-state armed conflicts the world thought were mostly in the past until Russia invaded Ukraine; to the irregular, asymmetrical, grey zone, hybrid, proxy, and 'small' wars that are being fought in every corner of the world.

In the 2001 movie *Behind Enemy Lines* Owen Wilson plays Lieutenant Burnett, a US Navy pilot who is shot down while patrolling the skies of the former Yugoslavia as the Bosnian War and all of its atrocities unfold on the ground. Frustrated with the role of NATO as a mere observer in this messy ethnic conflict and longing for the days when wars were an all-out confrontation between clearly defined enemies, LT Burnett exclaims: 'Everybody thinks they're gonna get a chance to punch some Nazi in the face in Normandy, but those days are over. They're long gone'. He is right. Barring some conflicts between states, most wars today correspond to non-traditional forms of armed struggle so complex that they may render the soldier preparing to land on Normandy rather perplexed, such as irregular and hybrid warfare.

These irregular, 'small' wars should be of particular interest to the praeter- colonial mind as they are a direct legacy of imperialism, and their consequences can be felt even today. In a recent study on the history of imperial violence as a centuries-long tale of systematic raiding and plunder, Lauren Benton reflects on the meaning and the lasting impact of what empires used to characterize as 'small wars', namely wars not fought amongst themselves (like the 'Great War' otherwise known as World War I) but waged against indigenous resistance to colonial domination.

By keeping the use of force right below the red line of all-out war, Benton points out, 'empires specialized in violence at the threshold of war and peace' (Benton 2024, 13). Eventually, international law would evolve to reflect the type of

war that is a direct reaction to said imperial violence, namely wars of national liberation, defined as 'armed conflicts in which peoples are fighting against colonial domination and alien occupation and against racist régimes in the exercise of their right of self-determination' (Kinsella 2011, 127–154). But the days of imperialistic violence are not gone, Benton also warns us, not least given the continuous imperialist military actions of Russia against its former colonies:

Today's warmongers resemble agents of empires when they claim that 'small' violence is necessary to keep and produce order. They deploy imperial languages of protection and peacekeeping to justify undeclared wars in far places. And they echo imperial sponsors when they assert that it is possible to limit the suffering unleashed by war (Benton 2024, 12).

Further, Michael Ignatieff, who coined the concept of 'Empire Lite' to refer to the kind of informal imperialism exercised at the turn of the twenty-first century by the US and its allies, explains what the division of labor looks like under this neo-imperial scheme: "America does the fighting, the Canadians, French, British and Germans do the police patrols in the border zones and the Dutch, Swiss and Scandinavians provide the humanitarian help (Ignatieff 2003, 18)."

What Ignatieff leaves out in this very simplistic account of contemporary empire and nation-building is that, as a result of British imperialism and the cultural and linguistic ties it promoted among certain countries, there is an intelligence sharing community of nations currently running all kinds of operations around the world, known as the 'Five Eyes' (Haan 2024). They include the US, the UK, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand.

Despite more internationally oriented defense initiatives – including permanent organizations such as NATO and ad-hoc coalitions such as the 'NATO Plus' currently supporting Ukraine in its war of self-defense – the Five Eyes enjoys some sort of informal prestige and carries much weight unofficially among the troops belonging to this pentarchy. It would appear that even among Western allies the narcissism of minor differences can drive some countries to place more trust in those who speak the same language and share the same history and institutional background, another legacy of imperialism that should be evident to the military praeter-colonial mind. Further, since the small wars of our post-colonial age have rather blurry contours with peace and with other forms of contemporary conflict, such as hybrid warfare or proxy warfare, Ignatieff's neat division of labor is not always so clear-cut and the modern soldier will more often than not find themselves playing the role of the 'strategic corporal', that is,

a soldier that possesses technical mastery in the skill of arms while being aware that his judgment, decision-making and action can all have strategic and political consequences that can affect the outcome of a given mission and the reputation of his country (Liddy 2005, 140).

The strategic corporal is supposed to perform several roles in the ever- changing modern battlefield depending on the tactical conditions of the situation, such that they may successfully navigate the 'three block war' (Ibid, 145) where on one block military force is called for, on the next one peacekeeping action is required, and on the next one humanitarian aid is needed. All in a day's work.

Going Native

How can the modern soldier, also endowed like the rest of us with the critical faculties of the praeter-colonial mind, make sense of the changing character of war, that is, its observable features across time (who fights, why they fight and how they fight)? If the legacies of imperialism are pretty much still with us, how can a modern-day warrior reconcile this with what he or she is supposed to embody, i.e. the military arm of the quintessentially post-colonial unit, the sovereign nation-state?

As I mentioned in the Introduction, the doctrinal document known as 'The Way of the New Zealand Warrior' published in 2020 is a remarkable attempt at squaring the circle of a colonial legacy coexisting with what is a distinctly post-colonial institution, the New Zealand Army. Accordingly, as this military ethics manual explains:

The modern New Zealand soldier is a mixture of cultures and backgrounds. The two great warrior cultures of the Māori and the British dominate the mix and have created a truly unique soldier. For over a hundred years New Zealand soldiers have shown that they are different from their British counterparts; that they have taken aspects of the British military culture, but have refined that rigidly disciplined approach into something new, something unique. Equally, the modern New Zealand soldier is different from the traditional Māori warrior but aspects of the aggressive and adaptable warrior culture are still maintained in the makeup of the modern New Zealand warrior (New Zealand Army 2020, 14).

Thus, the New Zealand Army has found a unique way to 'go native' without really having to pretend or sacrifice much, but in such a way that it combines the best of two traditions brought together by the vicissitudes of imperialism.

Another possibility is to embrace only those aspects of the local culture that the warrior believes are commendable, but not going full native as they do so. Michael Crichton's fictional account of the exploits of Ibn Fadlan is a good example (Crichton 1976). This is the story of a citizen of tenth century Baghdad who travels across many of the future post-Soviet spaces I described in the Introduction, eventually finding himself fighting alongside Vikings in the Baltic Sea – a story that inspired the film *The 13th Warrior.* Fadlan, a highly educated Arab man, is a superb observer of foreign cultures, who admires the courage of his fellow Nordic warriors as much as he despises their primitive ways. He learns their tactics with the sword and the axe; yet, he remains a son of the City of Peace and never goes full native.

But there are far worse things than going native and culturally appropriating someone else's warrior tradition. There is always the possibility that armies may decide to shake off all the trappings of civilized behavior, native or imported, 'taking the gloves off' as it were (Mayer 2008). This is what happens when irregular or dirty wars are waged against asymmetrical forces, such as guerrillas or terrorists. These asymmetric conflicts are the new 'small wars', a legacy of colonialism that survive in our post-colonial world. An interesting case in point is the political violence that took place at the end of the world during the second half of the twentieth century, to which I finally turn.

End of the Ratline

The south of Chile – '*el Sur*' – is one of the most beautiful places in the world. Vast forests of emerald-green are nestled between the majestic Andes with their snowy summits to the east, and the Pacific Ocean with its deep blue waters to the west. It is where the people who gave us the Mapudungun language that inspired many of my boy scouts group's traditions, the Mapuche tribe, are originally from.

It is also where one of the longest and bloodiest wars between the Spanish and the natives was fought, known as the 'Arauco War', the Mapuche people proving to be for centuries as indomitable to the Spaniards as the Scots were to the Romans. Although they would eventually be 'pacified' by the Chilean government, their tale of heroic resistance against oppression continues to inspire Chileans to this day, as evidenced by the rehabilitation of the Mapuche nation flag as a symbol of our own version of the culture wars. But this epic land where so many heroic battles have been fought and so much bravery has been displayed over the centuries also has a dark secret. This paradise on earth has been also home to a little slice of hell, a place called '*Colonia Dignidad*' or 'Dignity Colony', where many of the dark forces that dominated the twentieth century converged in a most singular way.

Philippe Sands, one of the best legal minds of our time, has famously documented the incredible travails leading to the criminalization and punishment of some of the most horrendous acts of the past century, namely genocide and crimes against humanity, in a scholarly saga including the titles *East West Street* (Sands 2016), *The Ratline* (Sands 2021), and *38 Londres Street* (Sands 2025). The trilogy touches upon the story of one Nazi war criminal, Walther Rauff, who escaped Europe and justice through the 'ratline' leading all the way down to South America, particularly Chile, where he continued to commit atrocities in complicity with Augusto Pinochet.

Colonia Dignidad is one of those places in Chile where Nazis ended up after the war (Stavans 2022). Founded in 1961 by a German war veteran, Paul Schäfer, it was an enclave in southern Chile where German migrants could work the land and preserve their traditional ways and language. It was also home to a fanatic religious cult*Colonia*

Dignidad was a place where people were systematically disciplined and, ironically, deprived of their dignity on a daily basis, through policies such as physical punishment, isolation, and the continuous rape of thousands of children. After Pinochet's CIA-sponsored coup in 1973, the German settlement became a site for torturing and executing political dissidents as part of the dictatorship's dirty war (or 'small war') against communism. Simply put, the sewers carrying all of humanity's filth during the twentieth century converged in a final point of discharge in Chile, where Nazis, religious fanatics, misogynists, pedophiles, torturers, and murderers redefined what the expression 'heart of darkness' means. In the event, Pinochet never paid for his many crimes (he died in 2006 before he could be convicted), but at least Paul Schäfer was sentenced and spent the rest of his life in prison until his death in 2010.

Colonia Dignidad has captured the imagination of many writers, including Chilean novelist Roberto Bolaño, who writes about a fictional *Colonia Renacer* ('Rebirth Colony') in his volume *Nazi Literature in America* (Bolaño 2016, 81). It is also a place where the praeter-colonial mind can identify the dark legacies of German colonialism (in particular, settler colonialism in combination with the ripples of the failed Nazi empire) as they interact with Chile's own post-colonial sins with regards to its indigenous populations and the small wars waged against them to make room for European migrants, including the pacification of the Mapuche and the genocide of the Selk'nam (Sands 2025, 127). A dark place in an otherwise idyllic corner of the world.

About the author:

Francisco Lobo holds a PhD in War Studies from King's College London. He also holds an LLM in International Legal Studies (New York University), an LLM in International Law and an LLB (University of Chile). He has worked as a legal practitioner in the private and public sectors. He has more recently worked as an advisor for an international development project to train the Armed Forces of Ukraine in IHL and military ethics standards. His research focuses on international law, human rights, the laws and ethics of war, legal theory, moral philosophy, and history.