

The utopia of the disarmed empire

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Gabriel Arturo Farías Rojas

Professor, Adolfo Ibáñez University, Chile

Correspondence: Gabriel Arturo Farías Rojas, Professor, Adolfo Ibáñez University, Chile, Email prof.gfariasroja@gmail.com**Received:** September 15, 2023 | **Published:** September 26, 2023

Introduction

Contrary to what was traditionally thought, the frontier is not that naturally flexible and expandable place in history in which the colonizers advanced everywhere with a smile on their faces and the complete realization of a desire for territorial discovery as well as possession of what was discovered. This dichotomy is not only based on the chimera of a virtual binarism to begin our introduction to the work of the historian Pekka Hämäläinen¹ but on a specific aspect of the historiography of the concept of the American frontier with the controversial article by Frederick Jackson Turner who, although he generated a new historiographic movement thanks to the rejection of his hypothesis, undoubtedly stimulated a hitherto diffuse investigative turn. In this regard, Turner expresses that “the frontier is the outer edge of the wave, the point of contact between barbarism and civilization. Much has been written about the border from the point of view of the war and hunting carried out there, but the importance it presents for the economist and the historian as a field of serious study has been overlooked.² The above only reinforces the idea that the border is the limit of a civilized world and the uncivilized one, that is, the indigenous world, which is not only barbaric, in the very words of Turner, but, upon coming into contact with the civilized world, the second must necessarily influence the first, that is, it must civilize it.

However, it is this contact that is established as a civilizing process, which did not necessarily occur in fluid or peaceful terms, as the author suggests. However, from the colonizing position, this contact represented an evolution of whoever was contacted on the other side of the border, which at the same time is shown as an extension of it. Along these lines, Turner dares to affirm that “North American social development has continually restarted on the border. This perennial rebirth, this fluidity of American life, this westward expansion with its new opportunities and its uninterrupted contact with the simplicity of society, provides the forces that dominate American society.” In this way, the colonized are not only barbarians, but they are also considered simple beings whose possible complex development, or a little less simple. It would depend unavoidably on the emancipatory process of civilizing contact with the North American, in a new rebirth of the colonized and of North American society as a hegemonic society. Likewise, from the colonizing perspective, the indigenous not only does not resist - or, if they do, the invisibility of said resistance annuls it and reduces it to historiographical nothingness - but must be grateful for the social development that is offered to them and that would free us from the confines of the chaos of barbarism.

Due to the previously stereotyped representation of the indigenous people in the face of the expansion of the border, the work of Hämäläinen is fundamental, which aims to rescue the history of the Comanche indigenous people because it breaks with the stereotypes of indigenous availability before the advance of the colonizer. And it is not content just to describe, analyze and narrate the subjectivity and vicissitudes of said people but presents it from an evolutionary point of view with climax and decline, the first of them becoming an empire. To achieve this historiographical enterprise, this Doctor in History from the University of Helsinki uses a comparative methodology, and an ethnographic analysis of historical sources, whose reverse logic in

chronological terms, that is, from the contemporary to the previous, has led the author, much to his regret, as he himself states, to “apply a <<collateral or secondary>> logic and deduce interpretations of Comanche cultural values from general models of societies.

Indigenous people of the Great Plains or other regions.” This could not only make the author fall into a re-fetishization of - or an attempt to stereotype - the Comanche culture, as an indigenous culture, but also, although he refers to a comparative methodology in which he makes use of sources in the Spanish language, the majority presence of sources in the English language and the almost absence of primary sources in the Spanish language can be counterproductive to the path of the comparative methodology supposedly embraced by him. We will refer to the latter later.

The final result of the historical-methodological process that we mentioned is a work with a consistent and interesting narrative of an indigenous culture that is born and develops in the border environment, and not only imitates colonizing dynamics of the conquerors themselves, but also appropriates them to such point that ends up becoming a force that subjugates other peoples in itself. They even used degrading practices such as slavery. However, their motive, unlike the Europeans and their American descendants, was never possession since, while the colonizers understood the supposed barbarians as beings available to civilizing contact, for the Comanches, said availability was found in the land, which belonged to everyone and at the same time to no one. Consequently, with respect to the criticisms that we can see in the work, we would like to refer particularly to methodological aspects and, specifically, to aspects specific to the historian’s profession. And it is this last aspect that clarifies that, although the methodology carried out would not constitute a problem in itself, it is what supports it or should support it which we observe absent, the latter, an oxymoron of the history of an unarmed empire but whose story could lack the weapons of the historian’s trade, that is, its corpus and its characteristics for both its selection and interpretation. To support this idea, we would like to quote at length the words of Vincent Debais to reflect on the idea of context. In this way, he states that, the notion of context puts before the ‘graphicality’ or ‘graphicity’ of the written object, and responds to the convergence movements carried out by the auxiliary sciences of

medievalism for around ten years inviting us to consider the written object as a unity, like a complex organic system in which the writing of letters but also the image, the materiality of the document, the environment of production and the horizon of reception intervene. The notion of context allows us to reconcile the different states of the written object, to know the form, they are content, they are status and they are objective in an instant T, and the long times of the life of the letter, with its modifications, its copies, its alterations, its translations.^{3,4}

It is not possible to reconcile a prolonged narrative of Spanish-Comanche relations without the majority presence of historical sources in the Spanish language in the absolute absence of Comanche historical sources – as writing is not a vehicle of communication for the latter.⁵ This inevitably refers us to a marked presence of the historical context at the expense of the co-text, which would have the effect of discarding a valuable collection of data that could give us many more insights and further interpretations that could help us to reject outright or also outright reinforce the idea of a Comanche Empire, according to the original and astute thesis defended by Pekka Hämäläinen in the, in any case, great work *The Comanche Empire*.¹

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Conflicts of interest

The authors declares that there are no conflict of interests.

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