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*Rebranding Chile:
Nineteenth-Century Modernization Efforts and Their Consequences*

ABSTRACT: *This article explores the nation formation of nineteenth-century Chile. Using period writings, maps, drawings, and photographs in conjunction with recent scholarship, it examines Chile's modernization efforts and their effects on the country's national identity. Adapting European standards of modernity, Chile rebranded its nation's image by modernizing its cities while maintaining cultural elements that were uniquely Chilean.*

KEYWORDS: *Latin American history; nineteenth century; Chile; national identity; modernization; Europe; cities; Santiago; Benjamin Vicuña Mackenna; costumbrismo*

Introduction

In the late nineteenth century, Latin American countries revisited the interpretations of their national identities and their countries' places in an expanding global economy. Following the boom of European industrialization, countries like Chile strove to transform their societies to imitate Europe's growing world powers. The modernization of Chilean cities shaped the country's national identity in its effort to attract foreign investors. This did not just alter the physical attributes of cities but also the social aspects of Chilean culture. Additionally, with its state-building, Chile addressed the unresolved debate between the country's "European" definition of civilization and its definition of barbarism.

I. Chile's Global Economic Relationships

Chile carefully shaped its identity to establish an economic advantage in the global market. In the late nineteenth century, Latin American countries shifted production to meet the demands of a budding capitalist economy. In addition to competing with production in neighboring countries, Chile also had to contend with production overseas. To meet this challenge, Chile formed alliances with European nations, and the multiple European businesses established in Chile attest to the country's collaboration with foreign investors.

In 1883, Benjamin Vicuña Mackenna (1831-1886), an urban planner for Chile's capital city of Santiago, emphasized: "Chile must of necessity ultimately become an industrial nation like England, Switzerland, and the German provinces [...] The Argentine Republic, New Zealand, Austria and California are competing with the same agricultural products, and already usurp Chile's former supremacy."¹ As competition between countries was growing, Chile recognized that, in order to become a modern nation, it had to develop its industry. Since such a development depended on financial support from investors, Chile needed to cultivate a reputation for stability and promise. By the 1870s, Chile's economic constancy

¹ Benjamin Vicuña Mackenna, *Chile* (Philadelphia: Times Printing House, 1883), 38.

attracted British commercial investments.² These investments underscored the reliability of Chile's economy and further supported its foreign relationships.

Chile's collaboration with foreign countries allowed it to benefit not just financially. For industrial modernization in the port city of Valparaíso, Chile relied on British expertise:³ British technicians advanced the development and manufacturing process, resulting in the rapid modernization of Chile's nitrate industry.⁴ A photograph from the collection of American journalist Frank G. Carpenter (1855-1924) depicts the modernity of a Chilean nitrate production plant.⁵ The quantity of vats illustrates the size and complexity of the operation, and the railroad tracks centered in the photograph highlight the importance of modern transportation and speak to the efficiency of Chile's nitrate production.

While many British companies managed businesses in Chile, Chilean investors, too, played an active role in the development of their own industries, and the collaboration between British and Chilean entrepreneurs was profitable for both countries. Chile redesigned its production to suit Britain's needs to guarantee economic security. Over time, Chilean and British investments in transportation facilities and production equipment helped modernize the nation's industrial infrastructure.⁶ Chileans encouraged British enterprises because British investment offered stability during an era of increasing global competition.

Though Chile's accelerated industrialization was largely due to foreign investment and expertise, Chile invited and promoted such foreign engagement. The successes of foreign enterprises became the successes of Chile, but Chile's economy also developed a dependency on the economies of its foreign investors.

II. Modern Infrastructure

Chile looked to European cities as models of modernity and aspired to emulate the latter's physical attributes of "advanced" civilizations. These attributes included the systematic layout of streets, the efficient movement of traffic, designs of waterways to supply cities with drinking water and sewage drains to promote sanitation, and abundant displays of monuments to celebrate the nation's history.

General city plans mimicked the orderliness of European cities. For Santiago, this order is evident in a lithograph of a plane-sketch of the city in 1863.⁷

² William Edmundson, *A History of the British Presence in Chile: From Bloody Mary to Charles Darwin and the Decline of British Influence* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 140, e-book.

³ Edmundson, *History of the British Presence in Chile*, 144.

⁴ Edmundson, *History of the British Presence in Chile*, 137.

⁵ "Nitrate Plant, Chile," Washington, D.C., Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, Frank and Frances Carpenter Collection, LOT 11356-19.

⁶ Charles G. Pregger-Roman, "Nineteenth-Century Chile: A Case Study: Subordination, the Class Process, and the Relative Autonomy of States," *Latin American Perspectives* 18, no. 1 (1991): 113-135, here 117.

⁷ "Plano-croquis de la ciudad de Santiago de Chile, 1863," *El Mercurio*, Biblioteca Nacional de Chile, Memoria Chilena.

Neighborhoods were well organized, and there was fluidity in the city's structure. Streets were neatly arranged in a gridded layout which resembled – and actually exceeded – that of London according to an 1845 illustrated map of the British capital.⁸ This arrangement of Chile's streets was a physical representation of the order and control wielded by the country's government. It also reflected rational planning, thus conveying the kind of stability and permanence sought by investors. In 1912, Julio Pérez Canto (1867-1953), the Consul General of the Chilean Embassy in London, wrote: "The general plan of Santiago is very regular, and for the most part the streets are straight and broad."⁹ Canto clearly approved of Santiago's layout and streets as evidence of the city's modernity.

Urban progress was also determined by the width of streets. According to language scholar Christopher Conway, "[n]ineteenth-century European ideas about urban planning were a product of capitalism."¹⁰ Wide streets allowed for seamless mobility, and an orchestrated design of movement indicated maximized efficiency in the transportation of products. An 1854 colored drawing of the *Paseo de la Cañada*, a boulevard in Santiago, provides an example.¹¹ Lined with trees and canals on either side, the *Paseo de la Cañada* exhibited both the beauty and practicality of a modern thoroughfare, and it accommodated a myriad of activities, including walking, horseback riding, and playing with dogs. This lively sketch of a day in the lives of Santiago's residents suggests a healthy and active economy.

The canals along the *Paseo de la Cañada* also represented an important concern in increasingly populated cities. According to the European standard, health and hygiene were indicative of an enlightened nation. City planning for sanitation was crucial for the well-being of residents, and Chile proved its capability by incorporating a complex water system. In Santiago, Benjamin Vicuña Mackenna was responsible for numerous projects that reshaped the city's image to conform to those European cities that Vicuña Mackenna admired. Among his ambitious plans, Vicuña Mackenna proposed the diversion of Santiago's Mapocho River since this body of water, which traversed the city, flooded regularly and was too polluted to provide drinking water.¹² Water diversion would also alleviate sewage management.¹² Although this project was only completed after his tenure as city planner, Vicuña Mackenna's vision of diverting the Mapocho River effectively transformed, unified, sanitized, and modernized Santiago.

⁸ "Rock's Illustrated Map of London, 1845," Boston Public Library, Norman B. Leventhal Map Center, Digital Commonwealth, Massachusetts Collections Online.

⁹ Julio Perez Canto, *Chile: An Account of Its Wealth and Progress*, with an introduction by Robert P. Porter (Chicago and New York: Rand McNally, 1912), 177.

¹⁰ Christopher Conway, *Nineteenth-Century Spanish America: A Cultural History* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2015), 26.

¹¹ Claudio Gay, *Atlas de la historia física y política de Chile*, Vol. 1 (Paris: E. Thunot, 1854), 52.

¹² Conway, *Nineteenth-Century Spanish America*, 28.

City parks also improved the health of residents and demonstrated Santiago's sophistication. Thus, the *Paseo de Santa Lucia*, adjacent to Santiago's historic center, was another project designed by Vicuña Mackenna. The construction of this park in 1872 embraced European architecture. Contemporary images of the *Paseo de Santa Lucia* feature buildings, columns, and statues that embody the spirit of European aesthetics.¹³ Overlooking the city, the *Paseo de Santa Lucia* was home to "an outdoor theater, a restaurant, ample patios and terraces, and pathways through gardens."¹⁴ Vicuña Mackenna's planning proved that Chile could not just meet the expectations of a modern city but surpass them as well.

Any modern city would be incomplete without visible testaments to its greatness, and an example for this is Santiago's 1859 equestrian statue of José de San Martín (1778–1850), considered the "liberator" of Chile, Argentina, and Peru from the Spanish Empire. Evidence of its cities' progress, Chile's urban monuments attested to the country's long history and symbolized the nation's strength. While gazing upon a monument, "a citizen could experience a sense of belonging to a historical community."¹⁵ Chile's monuments embodied a sense of shared memory which had the ability to foster pride in Chileans, unite an imagined community, and fortify the nation's progressive trajectory. Monuments celebrated heroes and commemorated victories. They were the embodiment of the carefully curated versions of history that were promoted to be remembered and revered. Devised for both Chileans and foreigners, monuments contributed to the construction and definition of Chile's national identity.

By aligning its design standards to those of European cities, Chilean cities proved their country's unlimited potential. Straight, wide streets compelled investors to think of order and efficiency. Modern water and sewer systems, as well as urban parks, persuaded visitors to perceive Chile as healthy and scientifically advanced. And monuments pushed for the country's recognition as a well-established nation. In all these, Chile defined itself for the gaze of foreigners.

III. Socio-Cultural Behavior

The demands of modernity extended to the social conditioning of Chilean society. Cities had to look modern and behave in modern ways. Citizens of a progressive nation were expected to show proper education, exhibit a respectable appearance, and conduct themselves in accordance with appropriate socio-cultural behavior. Adherence to these standards implied a measure of conformity to what was believed to be the more refined set of social norms of European societies.

Chile's education system confirmed the perceived superiority of European standards of education. According to Gertrude Yeager, the Venezuelan humanist

¹³ Benjamin Vicuña Mackenna, *Album del Santa Lucia: Colección de las principales vistas monumentos, jardines, estatuas i obras de arte de este paseo: Dedicado a la Municipalidad de Santiago por su actual presidente B. Vicuña Mackenna* (Santiago de Chile: Libreria del Mercurio, 1874), 81.

¹⁴ Conway, *Nineteenth-Century Spanish America*, 29.

¹⁵ Conway, *Nineteenth-Century Spanish America*, 30.

scholar Andrés Bello (1781-1865), inaugural rector of the “Universidad de Chile” (established in 1842), “served as a guiding spirit of the *estado docente* [i.e., the “teaching state”] system.”¹⁶ Based on his life in England between 1810 and 1829, Bello’s knowledge of Britain’s public education shaped Chile’s educational operations. The desire for foreign faculty and school supplies affirmed the belief in European superiority, and the Instituto Nacional oversaw the selection of both curriculum and personnel.¹⁷ As Yeager informs us, “Instituto rectors soon concluded that the recruitment of talented faculty, particularly the foreign faculty thought essential to its science programs, depended on the existence of modern [...] equipment [...] Most of these supplies were ordered from foreign sources.”¹⁸ Schools trained students to use European equipment, follow a European curriculum, and adhere to the instruction of their European teachers. Thus, the entire educational infrastructure laid the foundation for reconfiguring a new identity for a new generations of Chileans.

Training in proper behavior began in public schools. Schools all over Latin America introduced students to the authoritative work on behavior, namely, the 1853 *Compendio del manual de urbanidad y buenas maneras* (“Compendium of the Manual of Civility and Good Manners”), written by the Venezuelan educator and music teacher Manuel Antonio Carreño (1812-1874), in the form of an abbreviated version for children.¹⁹ This manual served as a rulebook for the desired etiquette in both private and public settings. The attention devoted to proper social conduct is evident from the book’s popularity: it was reprinted and distributed in multiple countries, and such uniformity of instruction engendered a uniformity of manners. In essence, training youth to behave appropriately ensured a future generation that would represent its nation’s civility.

Dedication to high standards of personal hygiene was fundamental to a respectable public appearance because it promoted science, and science had established a direct link between hygiene and health. Though bathing occurred only once a week, there was a strict routine of washing “hands, feet, faces, necks, eyes, and ears with basins of water and towels.”²⁰ All parts of the body that were exposed were subjected to meticulous cleaning in order to be properly presentable. Dental care was also required. An appearance of cleanliness demanded careful consideration: keeping clothes clean was especially necessary since most people did not have multiple sets of clothes. The collaboration of health practitioners and

¹⁶ Gertrude M. Yeager, “Elite Education in Nineteenth-Century Chile,” *The Hispanic American Historical Review* 71, no. 1 (1991): 73-105, here 79.

¹⁷ Yeager, “Elite Education in Nineteenth-Century Chile,” 80.

¹⁸ Yeager, “Elite Education in Nineteenth-Century Chile,” 87.

¹⁹ See Conway, *Nineteenth-Century Spanish America*, 96.

²⁰ Conway, *Nineteenth-Century Spanish America*, 97.

state law enforcement led to the development of regulations, laws, and policing.²¹ Just as the modern city was expected to be a pillar of health, so was the expectation of hygiene and health extended to its citizens.

The complexities of proper social behavior in public were defined by appropriate responses to a variety of circumstances. Nonviolent and non-confrontational behavior promoted civility. In the event of a conflict, an aggressive response from a *macho gaucho* (“male cowboy”) would not be acceptable and most likely frowned upon. The preference for maintaining composure signified a shift in societal inclinations. The compliance of proper social cues also asserted social standing. According to Conway, the “*urbanidad* (refinement)”²² of the members of high society—literally a behavior appropriate for city-living—could be equated with theatricality. Social interaction and posturing was a performance by “civilized” individuals for others to take note. The simple act of walking down a street provides an example for the required negotiation of movement. When two individuals of different social standing met, certain factors would determine who needed to proceed, step aside, or even step off the sidewalk.²³ Careful, conscientious action supported the notion of an orderly and controlled society.

No stage would be complete without its actors. Much like Chilean cities exemplified the adoption of European aesthetics, Chileans themselves had to assimilate to European ways of thinking and behaving. Only well-groomed, well-behaved, and well-educated individuals were considered respectable, civilized, and proper representatives of their country’s respectability and civility. The success of the nation depended on Chile’s willingness to conform to European ideals of modernity.

IV. The “Outsiders”

The modernization of Chilean cities inspired developments toward national progress, but these innovations were not to be enjoyed by everyone. Vicuña Mackenna designed the *Camino de la Cintura* (i.e., the beltline road) as a divider between Santiago’s center and the outskirts of the city.²⁴ This physical barrier removed the city’s slums—symbols of barbarism—from the kind of civil society that Chile wanted its capital of Santiago to represent. The lack of progress, hygiene, and order in those urban spaces known as *conventillos* (tenements) raised concerns about the barbarism still present in the nation’s cities.²⁵ Blame was assigned and possible solutions were offered in the name of progress.

²¹ Juan Mansilla Sepúlveda, Claudia Huaiquián Billeke, Jaime Díaz Córdova, Mario Pellón Arcaya, Germán Moreno Leiva, Juan Guillermo Estay Sepúlveda, and Leónidas Arias Poblete, “Protomedicatos y lazaretos como instituciones de control de la higiene pública en Chile entre 1879 y 1920,” *Medwave: Revista biomédica revisada por pares* 20, no. 2 (2020): e7841.

²² Conway, *Nineteenth-Century Spanish America*, 95.

²³ Conway, *Nineteenth-Century Spanish America*, 98.

²⁴ Conway, *Nineteenth-Century Spanish America*, 28-29.

²⁵ Conway, *Nineteenth-Century Spanish America*, 34-35.

If the infrastructure in Chile's cities increasingly conveyed a sense of progress, such progress was not to be found in the slums. There, narrow, unpaved, and irregular streets took the place of wide, orderly boulevards. Overcrowded slums housed many in "straw dwellings called ranchos."²⁶ Poorly planned, these parts of town lacked basic resources such as adequate sewage and trash collection systems. Residents found themselves living in a state of primitive backwardness despite their close proximity to the newly renovated, progressive parts of the city. Unsurprisingly, slums became breeding grounds for various diseases.

According to Conway, "[t]hroughout Spanish America, [...] infectious diseases, as well as smallpox, scarlet fever, and dysentery, sowed panic among people and resulted in city improvements in sewage removal and waterworks."²⁷ Diseases affected all members of society regardless of status and pressured cities to address inadequate hygienic practices in the slums. Fear led to the conclusion that social evils were responsible for pervasive diseases. Some believed that crime, gambling, and alcoholism could simply be cured by practicing hygiene.²⁸ This irrational simplification of problems refused to acknowledge social inequalities and silenced the voices of the marginalized members of Chile's society.

Chilean society also blamed people living in their midst for the barbarism of slums. Vicuña Mackenna indicated that the slums located south of Santiago were "primarily populated by Africans, mulattoes, and mestizos."²⁹ Leading Chileans did not want these people to participate in the formation of their country's modern national identity. Along with the poor and people of other ethnic origins, women were condemned as "biologically inferior." In the case of prostitution, society faulted women as contributors to social problems and responsible for the spread of diseases: "Policymakers [...] drew from gender to explain [...] that women were prone to prostitution because of innate tendencies [...] vanity, materialism, and naivete."³⁰ The refusal to acknowledge the social problems behind prostitution stands in contradiction to a society that was otherwise quick to embrace progress.

Widespread racism served to justify the ill-treatment of marginalized people and caused Chileans to espouse the belief that the nation could not progress without an influx of European immigrants. Many people believed in the mental inferiority of natives. In the words of Fredrick B. Pike, "[a] prominent army general contended [...] that southern Chile was doomed unless Indian influence was eradicated by European immigration. A noted intellectual [...] [observed that] national progress was unlikely unless a veritable flood of white immigration

²⁶ Conway, *Nineteenth-Century Spanish America*, 33.

²⁷ Conway, *Nineteenth-Century Spanish America*, 34.

²⁸ Conway, *Nineteenth-Century Spanish America*, 36.

²⁹ Conway, *Nineteenth-Century Spanish America*, 32.

³⁰ Conway, *Nineteenth-Century Spanish America*, 40.

descended upon the entire country.”³¹ Such beliefs were indicative of a general animosity toward the country’s Indigenous population. Chileans held the Indigenous responsible for their nation’s backwardness and sought a means to purify the impurity of Indigenous blood. The solution was the encouragement of immigration from European countries. According to William Edmundson, “[b]etween 1883 and 1901, around 36,000 European immigrants came to Chile.”³² This immigration boom served as a catalyst for the rise of European businesses. In Coronel, a port city south of Concepción, “the names over the shops—German, Italian, Spanish, and English—indicated a cosmopolitan population.”³³ These businesses firmly rooted Europeans in local communities, and a European presence soon permeated Chilean society. To bring about national progress, marriage to Europeans offered another solution. In a study tracking Chilean and Argentinian families, “there were a few cases of third-generation members marrying into European nobility [...] [and] a bond was formed between the groups of families and their European economic partners.”³⁴ Such unions between Europeans and Chileans enhanced the latter’s social status, promoted the desired “purification,” and embraced a more European type of civility.

Exacerbated by the concern over the nation’s economic future, Chile’s long history of racism and mistreatment condoned the villainization of women, Indigenous, Africans, and poor population groups. Cities in Chile illustrated the contradiction between civilization and barbarism. When redesigning these cities, considerations for the living conditions of those who allegedly did not belong to the nation’s identity were set aside. In discussions concerning social problems, those believed to be inherently inferior found themselves accused. Chileans viewed these groups of people as dangerous and barbaric, and deemed it necessary to restrict and control them. Opening the country to European immigrants was an easier solution than addressing the social inequalities at home.

V. Chilean Identity

While Chile made a great effort to redesign itself as a recognizably “European” civilization, it also sought acknowledgement by holding on to some defining features of Chilean heritage. Chileans noted that there were aspects of their land and culture that Europe lacked. This distinction between themselves and foreigners became a source of pride for Chileans.

Above all, Chile was defined by its unique culture. *Costumbrismo*, the pictorial representation of local people and places, celebrated the country’s cultural

³¹ Fredrick B. Pike, “Aspects of Class Relations in Chile, 1850-1960,” *The Hispanic American Historical Review* 43, no. 1 (1963): 14-33, here 31.

³² Edmundson, *History of the British Presence in Chile*, 104.

³³ Edmundson, *History of the British Presence in Chile*, 126.

³⁴ Diana Balmori and Robert Oppenheimer, “Family Clusters: Generational Nucleation in Nineteenth-Century Argentina and Chile,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 21, no. 2 (1979): 231-261, here 241.

distinctiveness.³⁵ Nineteenth-century novels by Chilean authors incorporated local settings into their stories to inspire and promote local customs and values.³⁶ The integration of provincial spaces celebrated familiarity and enhanced the nation's pride. Chileans were also proud of what their land had to offer. In 1875, Chile hosted the Universal Exhibition of Latin America,³⁷ which provided a platform to showcase Chilean products.³⁸ This and other exhibitions served as declarations of progress, both in the achievements made in the production of raw materials and in the cultivation of an advanced civilization.

The ordinary and extraordinary distinguished Chileans from foreigners. Illustrations of daily life, *cuadros de costumbres* ("scenes of customs"), featured routine trades typical to Latin America such as the *aguador* or water carrier.³⁹ Sculptures also depicted local clothing styles and mannerisms.⁴⁰ Similar to the incorporation of local settings into national narratives, *cuadros de costumbres* highlighted common people, thereby applauding the familiar. Literary histories catalogued and advertised the nation's accomplishments. Listings of the country's elite professions were comparable to public monuments in that they were designed to be seen by the nation and by others.⁴¹ The production of literary histories marked "a surge of patriotic fervor associated with the ever more intense participation of Latin America in the international market."⁴² This body of work was created to extol Latin America's achievements and to proclaim Latin America's ascent to the world stage.

Although there were many adaptations to European standards of refinement, Chileans were proud of factors that were inherently Chilean. Their land and their people were unique to their culture. Yet, while this version of national identity was a source of pride, it was also carefully constructed with a European audience in mind. To retain its marketability, Chile needed to appear both familiar and exotic.

Conclusion

Chile's economic standing in a changing world economy required foreign investment. During the late nineteenth century, Chile depended on European

³⁵ Conway, *Nineteenth-Century Spanish America*, 149.

³⁶ Conway, *Nineteenth-Century Spanish America*, 61.

³⁷ Beatriz Gonzalez-Stephan, "Showcases of Consumption: Historical Panoramas and Universal Expositions," in *Beyond Imagined Communities: Reading and Writing the Nation in Nineteenth-Century Latin America* ed. Sara Castro-Klarén and John Charles Chasteen (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2004), 225-238, here 231.

³⁸ Gonzalez-Stephan, "Showcases of Consumption," 230.

³⁹ Conway, *Nineteenth-Century Spanish America*, 57-58.

⁴⁰ See, for example, a [nineteenth-century figure](#), University of British Columbia, Museum of Anthropology, Blanca and Ricardo Muratorio Collection, object number 2738/64.

⁴¹ Gonzalez-Stephan, "Showcases of Consumption," 234.

⁴² Gonzalez-Stephan, "Showcases of Consumption," 231.

nations to remain competitive. This dependency promoted a reliance on European paradigms to determine the guidelines of modernizing Chilean cities—both physically and socially. Chile redesigned its economy, urban infrastructures, hygienic regulations, social behaviors, and education in accordance with European models. The process of modernization ultimately revealed who and what mattered to the nation. This was evident in the physical composition of cities, both in their well-planned “civilized” sectors and their blatantly neglected slums. Modernity also manifested itself in differences of appearance, belief, and behavior between citizens deemed civilized and those deemed “barbaric.”

Chile’s national identity was a product of European influence and edited for the sake of European investment. Recognizing the reasons for this conforming to European pressures provides a better understanding of Chile’s development in the late nineteenth century and informs our perception of Chile’s standing in the global economy today.

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