


# A continent of and for whiteness?: “White” colonialism and the 1959 Antarctic Treaty

Alejandra Mancilla 

Department of Philosophy, Classics, History of Art and Ideas, Faculty of Humanities, University of Oslo, Norway

## Commentary

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### Author for correspondence:

Alejandra Mancilla,  
Email: [alejandra.mancilla@ifikk.uio.no](mailto:alejandra.mancilla@ifikk.uio.no)

### Abstract

There are at least four ways in which Antarctic colonialism was white: it was paradigmatically performed by white men; it consisted in the taking of vast, white expanses of land; it was carried out with a *carte blanche* (literally, “blank card”) attitude; and it was presented to the world as a white, innocent adventure. While the first, racial whiteness has been amply problematised, I suggest that the last three illuminate yet other moral wrongs of the Antarctic colonial project. Moreover, they might be constitutive of a larger class of “white” colonialisms beyond the White Continent.

“... there yet lurks an elusive something in the innermost idea of this hue...”

Herman Melville, *Moby Dick*

In this short commentary, I start from the assumption that Antarctica entered human history as part of the colonial enterprise undertaken mainly by European powers at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century, and continued into the present by them and other newcomers (see, among others, Dodds, 2002; Howkins, 2010; Maddison, 2014; Scott, 2017).

Four modalities of white Antarctic colonialism are interrogated, all of which have a bearing on how paradigmatic moments such as the 1959 Antarctic Treaty (AT) are understood. Southern polar colonialism was performed by white men, who took a white, empty land and created, with *carte blanche* (literally, “white card” or “blank card”), the rules to govern it in the late 1950s. This was done, moreover, as if it was a white, innocent adventure. While the first feature (i.e. the racial undertone) could be seen as contingent and has been extensively criticised and documented, I suggest that the last three illuminate yet other moral wrongs of the Antarctic colonial project: the overwhelming and hoarding acquisition of space for economic and strategic reasons (white space); the unequal terms in which the AT was drafted and negotiated, and under which it is maintained (*carte blanche*), and the cloak of innocence under which this was performed (white adventure). Towards the end, I suggest that these three whitenesses might be constitutive of a larger class of colonialisms, of which places like the deep sea bed and outer space could be sites for further interrogation.

### White men

Since the publication of Lisa Bloom’s *Gender on Ice* (1993), it has become a commonplace to recognise that the history of polar exploration, and Antarctic exploration within it, was performed and retold eminently by white males (see also Collis, 2004; Glasberg, 2012; van der Watt & Swart, 2015). Although there is evidence that the sealing and whaling crews, and the crews of some of the early expeditions were an ethnic alloy which included indigenous people from South America, Australia and Polynesia (Maddison, 2014, p. 76), the “official” heroic history of Antarctica is still dominated by figures like Scott and Amundsen—white men attempting the impossible to add to the greatness of their nations (Spufford, 1997). Moreover, even when gender imbalance began to be recognised and women appeared on the scene, Antarctic exploration remained an affair for mainly white people (with the Kaspersky Commonwealth Antarctic Expedition from 2009 being an exception).

Antarctica’s institutional history has also been mainly dominated by white men who laid down rules that would favour from the beginning the participation of countries with largely white populations in the immediate AT era. In fact, if one recalls the challenges and critical interventions to the way Antarctica has been governed during the last six decades, some of the most notorious have come from non-white sources. Just before the Treaty was signed, in 1956, newly independent India called for the internationalisation, denuclearisation and demilitarisation of Antarctica (Chaturvedi, 2013; Jara Fernández, 2006). In 1982, in a famous speech to the United Nations General Assembly, Malaysian Prime Minister, Mohamed bin Mahathir, declared Antarctica to belong to the international community (United Nations, 1982, p. 132). This inaugurated the

“Question of Antarctica,” which lasted until 2005 and coincided with a more diverse AT membership. Today, Google alerts on Antarctica point each week to China’s presence in a tone which is usually suspicious or fearful (Goh Sui Noi, 2018; Gothe-Snape, 2019). What Dodds and Collis (2017, p. 59) call “polar orientalism” (to wit, the unease of the original signatories in the face of a growing Asian engagement with Antarctica) is still very much alive.

### White space

In the mind of many, colonialism per definition requires one people being subjugated to the will of another (Kohn & Reddy, 2017). This is why perhaps the most controversial aspect of calling Antarctic colonialism “colonialism” is that it was enacted over empty, white space. While most of the colonial enterprise worldwide did in fact go hand in hand with the dispossession and subjugation of peoples, here—as the Second Officer of the *Zeele*, Dubouzet, put it in taking possession of Adélie Land—it was “a wholly pacific conquest,” with none of the “abuse which has been born of such acts” elsewhere. They had “dispossessed none” (except for a few penguins), and their titles were “incontestable” (quoted in Maddison, 2014, p. 52).

For what etymology is worth, however, there is nothing in the original meaning of the term that requires the taking of already occupied land. The *colonus* was a tiller, a planter, a farmer or, more generally, a settler in a new country. In this sense, it has been convincingly argued that Antarctica was the epitome of settler colonialism, a rich “resource frontier” that could simply be appropriated with no native resistance. As Adrian Howkins (2010, p. 32) succinctly puts it: “It was space, not people, that was at the centre of the settler colonial project [in Antarctica].”

This was openly acknowledged by the claimants who understood from the beginning the importance of appropriating Antarctic space. Even the countries that supposedly fought against “the colonial powers” in Antarctica took on a colonial attitude. The Chilean writer, Salvador Reyes, who took part in the Antarctic expedition from the Chilean Navy in 1954–1955 claimed that “Chile must get ready to fulfill its mission in the ‘Pacific era’, when possession of its Antarctic territory will be indispensable, because that territory and continental Chile form one and only geographic system of perfectly defined strategic and economic importance” (Reyes, 1956, p. 23, my translation).

### Carte blanche

Having *carte blanche* means having full discretionary power, and using one’s discretionary power to dominate others is one of the aspects of colonialism that gets routinely condemned (Ypi, 2013).

There are at least three moments of Antarctic colonialism that can be characterised along these lines: first, the unilateral taking by a few states of vast expanses of land, with a hoarding and overwhelming attitude, and in a context where the limits of the earth and its resources were already well known; second, the unilateral creation of a political association where not all those who should have been part were part; and third, the maintenance of a hierarchical political association with first- and second-class members, that is an association where not all members are treated on equal and reciprocal terms.

The United Kingdom inaugurated the method of unilateral appropriation in 1908, with the issuing of a Letters Patent. As one ingenious writer expressed it, the latter was “as inept in intention as ungrammatical in expression” (Winfield 1912 quoted in

Hayes, 1928, p. 364). For one thing, the statute extended the limits of the Falkland Islands so rashly that it included “non-British islands and continental land in the South Pacific.” For another thing, it set the limits “to the south of the fiftieth parallel of south latitude and the eightieth degree of west longitude (*sic*).” But, as this writer noted, “How land can be situated to the south of a meridian is not explained” (Winfield 1912, quoted in Hayes, 1928, p. 364). The Letters Patent, therefore, had to be reissued and geographically adjusted in 1917.

Rejecting the UK’s pretensions, Argentina and Chile came up with a different proposal to figure out territorial sovereignty. Bringing to memory the Treaty of Tordesillas signed between Spain and Portugal in 1494, both countries anointed themselves as the rightful inheritors of the Spanish Crown in Antarctica. The fact that the continent as a whole was at the time of the Treaty mere speculation (*terra australis incognita*), and that none of the other world powers recognised its validity, did not deter these countries from staking their claims. In the meantime, the other European claimants together with Australia and New Zealand were dividing the Antarctic into sectoral wedges, following the UK’s calculative methodologies (Mancilla, 2018). In an extreme and uninhabited environment like Antarctica, new ways of occupying land and natural resources were devised to ensure that colonialism could make itself manifest. The claiming process helped to generate enduring settler colonial solidarities, with mutual recognition of one another’s claims.

The process of creating rules for a whole continent with *carte blanche* reached its apex with the AT, in 1959. The original signatories appointed themselves as guardians of Antarctica and humanity more generally. At exactly the moment when decolonisation was taking root across Africa and Asia, 12 states (that had been Antarctic participants of the 1957–1958 International Geophysical Year) assumed the role of continental custodians (at the time, there were 82 member states in the United Nations [Rothwell, 2012, p. 46]).

The third *carte blanche* moment lies in the maintenance of a system where substantial scientific capacity is turned into the criterion for political participation, thus resulting in a two-tiered membership within the Treaty, which favoured the richer states (18 out of the 29 consultative parties are members of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, and only one African country—South Africa—has signed the Treaty). It was not uncommon to see in the archives of Commonwealth countries that the “Afro-Asian bloc” of countries might become interested in the fate of the Antarctic—and this was not regarded as welcome (Dodds, 2002).

Marti Koskenniemi’s reflections on the Eurocentrism of international law are useful for making sense of these *carte blanche* moments. Antarctic law and politics were negotiated *ex nihilo* by a handful of largely Western states, and the shared colonial origins of such law should be highlighted rather than hidden (Koskenniemi, 2011, pp. 14–15). If one of the challenges of international law in general and of the AT in particular is to gain moral legitimacy, then the privileged parties should be candid about the peculiarities of its genesis and current functioning.

### Clad in white

The main actors of the heroic era were depicted as being motivated by bravery, endurance, fortitude, loyalty and service (Roberts, 2017, p. 152). Even today, Antarctica remains a test site of and for human qualities in remote and extreme environments.

When it comes to the taking of polar territory, it is striking how the sovereign acts of the claimants are naturalised and normalised. As an expression of “banal nationalism” (Billig, 1995), the pictures of Chilean and Argentinian children living with their families in the military settlements of Villa las Estrellas and Esperanza Base seem particularly potent. The everyday lives of the families serve to “domesticate” those southern territories.

The AT is usually hailed as an international arrangement driven by a shared desire of keeping peace and promoting harmony. Without its presence, Antarctica could have ended up being militarised and nuclearised during the Cold War. And, although the myth of Antarctic exceptionalism has been convincingly debunked (Dodds & Collis, 2017, p. 53), the default framing is still one of friendly international cooperation where the interests of humanity as a whole have prevailed over the sectional interests of specific parties. This, despite of the fact that the convoluted negotiations over the Ross Sea marine protected area have provided some notable insights into how parties can and do argue over fishing resource rights (Liu & Brooks, 2018).

### White colonialism beyond Antarctica

The way in which huge wedges of white land were claimed; the way in which a new order composed of a few parties was created and maintained; and the way in which an aura of innocence and disinterested goodwill covered and still covers Antarctic politics are three morally problematic whitenesses that add to the obvious, racial whiteness that distinguished it from the start. In concluding, I suggest that the first three whitenesses might not be restricted to Antarctica, but might have played and play a role in the appropriation of other white spaces, like the deep sea bed and outer space. How this should affect their prospects for legitimacy and future governance remains to be discussed.

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