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Abstract
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“Sublime” Science and the Authoritarian Regime of Diego Portales

In 1830, the nascent Chilean republic hired a French naturalist to conduct a massive scientific survey of the nation. The long-term study aimed to do no less than develop and publicize knowledge about the entire nation’s flora, fauna, agriculture, geology, and geography. The scope of the project mimicked the sweeping study of Alexander von Humboldt’s journey through the Americas a generation earlier, and echoed Enlightenment-era objectives of individual inspiration and the production of “sublime ideas” about nature. In the same era, the Chilean government, under a conservative coalition led by Diego Portales, actively stamped down civil liberties, censored the media, and sought to consolidate control over its hinterlands.

“ ‘Sublime’ Science and the Authoritarian Regime of Diego Portales” examines the impetus for the Portales regime to embrace Enlightenment-inspired nature study to promote its illiberal agenda. Current historiography prioritizes egalitarian subjectivity over the relationship between humans and the natural world. Scholars like James C. Scott privilege local knowledge over state authority in twentieth century contexts. This paper takes a step back in time to examine authoritarianism in a necessarily more limited, nineteenth century form. For the Portales regime, the seemingly liberal-minded tenants of modern science actually posed few political risks while offering a degree of international prestige and, more importantly, means with which to more tightly manage the Chilean people and territory.