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Meat as Metaphor in Contemporary Uruguay and Argentina

The development of social and economic structures in Argentina and Uruguay has been closely and intimately tied in each country to the stages of growth of their respective cattle industries. The nascent industry nurtured by the Spaniards centuries ago has grown to immense proportions, but the archetypal Argentine is still the gaucho ranging over the Pampas, the archetypal Uruguayan a gaucho in the countryside. The ideal of the gaucho and the reality of the modern ranching system both greatly influence everyday life in these countries, where the consumption of meat is closely tied to participation in the national identity. The ideal of the gaucho and free-range nonintensive ranching have long been consistent with one another, and have been an apt way of defining these countries in opposition to the rest of the world. Increasingly, however, changes in the cattle industry and globalizing influences are destabilizing Argentine-Uruguayan conceptions of the industry. This has led to tension within and outside the industry, as different perspectives vie for the chance to re-define what it means to be Argentine or Uruguayan in contemporary society.

Part I: Overview of industry's early development

The history of the Argentine and Uruguayan meat industry begins with early Spanish expeditions where Spaniards freed small numbers of cattle on the prairies. These cattle were met by temperate weather, a relative lack of predators, and abundant prairie grasses; as a result of these favorable conditions and a lack of human intervention, they reproduced themselves across the landscape. Early naturalists estimated that 48 million

head of cattle roamed the Argentine and Uruguayan territories at the beginning of the eighteenth century. This has meant that cattle are considered an abundant natural resource in both countries, a resource springing naturally from the landscape and existing in harmony with it.

Spain was hungry for leather goods, and in the beginning of the seventeenth century gauchos made a living by catching and skinning these wild cattle and shipping the hides to Spain. Large cattle chases called "vaquerías" were something akin to commercial hunting parties on the plains. Gauchos gathered in large groups and rode horses (also captured in the wild) in hot pursuit of herds of wild cattle. The level of skill involved in catching cattle at this point is worth noting. The men used knives to slice the tendons on the back of the cattle's legs, and an indigenous weapon similar to the lasso to catch cattle in their flight. When the hunt was completed the felled cattle were skinned by peons and the "trophies" (skins) were carried home and traded. This was before the invention of refrigeration, so the meat from these cattle could not be traded and most of it was left to rot in the fields. There was such a surfeit of cattle roaming the plains that the gauchos could travel with the knowledge that fresh meat would be available anywhere on the plains. They slept outdoors in the same clothes they wore while riding, and entertained themselves with songs, tobacco, and gambling. If gauchos wanted for something, they would put in some time working for a primitive cattle farm and take off again when they had accumulated enough money. Here we see the early development of another notion associated with cattle and ranching; ranching and living off of the land's animals allows for increased freedom and independence.

The nomadic lifestyle of the gauchos prevented them from planting crops, so from early on in the colonies' histories the harvest of animals was more important than the harvest of plants. Additionally, Spain forbid the colonies from competing with any of her monopolies. The leather industry was allowed to develop unfettered because Spain did not have a strong domestic industry. Agriculture, on the other hand, experienced heavy repression, and Spain was not above the destruction of plantations. This meant that two decades after the establishment of Buenos Aires, when "los 80 vecinos primitivos se habían transformado en más de 12.000 almas, no se admitía la expansion agrícola" (Giberti 67). Contemporary dependence on cattle can thus be traced to early colonial times, when material and culinary culture were centered around cattle because they were what was available. Agronomy was considered fool's work, as it was looked down upon by the Spaniards and was extremely labor intensive(Giberti 66).

From the eighteenth century onwards cattle ranching was considered a respectable profession, and cattle ranchers formed the upper crust of society. These early landed classes foretold the arrangement of today's market, where in Uruguay "40% of the farmers control 70% of the land" (from a conversation with Victor Pike). This segment of society began to attain real power in the nineteenth century, when farms started using wire fences to enclose their *estancias.* Cattle became much more valuable, as they became private rather than public property. Gauchos were essentially phased out of the leather production process, and were increasingly regarded as useless vagabonds. Those gauchos who joined the *estancias* as workers were the predecessors of the peons who do most of the farm work today.

The use of cattle became increasingly more efficient with the development of *saladeros*, large operations that salted meat and packed it in barrels. This process allowed colonists to begin trading Argentine and Uruguayan meat. Salted meat quickly became a main export essential to the project of empire-building, as it afforded the Spaniards with a cheap food source for slaves and sailors. Finally the advent of refrigeration and the development of train lines allowed for easy transport of fresh meat. This increased the two countries' trade capabilities and allowed them to trade with the rest of the world. As a result cattle became an even greater priority for Argentines and Uruguayans, as they increasingly defined themselves on the world market as producers of first-rate beef.

Part II: Meat in everyday life

Tourists to Argentina often experience frustration at beef's dominance of Argentine menus. As one American honeymooner to Argentina says: "I ordered grilled eggplant. It came stuffed with ground beef. I tried the gnocchi, ubiquitous on every parrilla menu, and got it topped with a Bolognese sauce. It was beginning to seem like everything, except the mixed green salad, French fries, and flan, was served with beef" (Clark). Beef-based menus occur as a matter of course in restaurants across both countries. However, beef-based menus are important to the tourism industry because they allow tourists to the city to feel that they are experiencing part of the rustic lifestyle of the countryside. The emphasis on the city's connection to the native landscape of the countryside is important, as it makes it clear to the tourist that he is not in a second-rate European city but in Latin America. Tourists are fascinated with the ways in which the European, urban sensibilities of Argentines and Uruguayans interact with the more

"primitive" and "rural" aspects of the local tradition. In fact, even Argentines are fascinated with this conflict within themselves: "Para el consiente colectivo somos un país de campaña, aunque para el consiente individual formamos una comunidad urbana. Los argentinos en general (salvo los angloargentinos) somos gente de ciudad por naturalez" (Guzmán). The pull of these two forces is clearly seen in the way Argentina and Uruguay are marketed to outsiders. Tourists to the city of Buenos Aires may not encounter any cattle farms, but they will be inundated with the images and products of the cattle industry. While these tourists may spend their days looking at buildings and monuments, they need only sneak a peek into the door of a souvenir-shop to find that it is redolent with the scent of leather. Although these stores do carry miniature obelisques and postcards of couples doing the tango, their big-ticket items tend to be ponchos, gaucho hats, gaucho belts, leather matés emblazoned with images of bucking horses. These souvenirs extend to the tourist the possibility of participating in the rituals and wearing the costumes that mark an Argentine or Uruguayan. Thus the cities serve a huge purpose for the cattle industry because they are the main sites for interaction with the exterior, and therefore the major sites of consumption for meat and the mythmaking surrounding Argentine and Uruguayan culture. Not only are the cities the site of mythmaking, they are also the final destination for most of both nations' cattle. Cattle are raised in the countryside, but they are unilaterally slaughtered in large, often government-owned slaughterhouses in the cities. Thus the cattle industry serves another purpose for Argentina and Uruguay in uniting regions with very different demographics in a symbiotic relationship.

Regardless of his actual connection to cattle ranching, the contemporary Argentine and Uruguayan believes that there is a bit of the gaucho in him or her. This gaucho spirit is aligned in the public consciousness with a shared national identity. Perhaps the contemporary Argentine and Uruguayan's devotion to the gaucho is due in part to Spaniards' historical contempt for the gaucho as an indolent and indomitable aspect of the conquered land. Spaniards rejected the gaucho, yet he did not exist before Spanish cattle overran Argentina and Uruguay; this paradox allows Argentines to think of the gaucho as theirs because he is both not pan-South American and distinctly non-Spanish. The gaucho may also strike a chord with the contemporary Argentine or Uruguayan because he represents the wildness and freedom of the days before industrialization, not the wildness of the days before colonization. That is to say, the gaucho is appealing and non-threatening because he adopts some aspects of indigenous culture but is emphatically not an Indian. The classic gaucho has tan skin because of his lifestyle, but he is born a white man: "Gauchos were predominantly of Spanish blood, but in some cases some Indian blood could be traced" (Lanuza 40). Thus the gaucho simultaneously represents Argentine-Uruguayan adaptation to Spanish rule and Argentine-Uruguayan rebellion and eventual independence from that rule. In fact the gauchos were even influential in the Argentine War of Independence, serving as guerilla warriors whose wildness, skill, and unpredictability terrorized Spanish troops. According to Lanuza, the word Gaucho began to lose "its pejorative sense" in the nineteenth-century, as travelers who lacked the ability to distinguish between a gaucho and a countryman "called every countryman a gaucho. By degrees the word, which once seemed offensive, assumed an implication of praise" (26). Today there is a wide range of

stereotypical behaviors available with which Argentines and Uruguayans may express their "gaucho side." These behaviors often include horseback riding, visiting family farms and helping with the care of cattle, reading literature within the "gaucho genre," and even drinking the maté that was celebrated by gauchos as an excellent substitute for food.

In much the same way that contemporary American students are thought to require computer knowledge in order to be empowered and competitive members of society, an understanding of the meat industry has historically been considered essential for Argentine boys. This knowledge is most often imparted by parents and family, but sometimes it even finds its way into school curricula; in the sixties and seventies one of Argentina's top private elementary schools devoted a portion of the sixth grade curriculum to "la vaca." Middle-aged men who were part of this program can still remember portions of the experience:

> En Argentina estudias la vaca como si fuera sagrada. Estudiabas el aprovechamiento de la vaca, que toda la vaca se usaba y para qué se usaba cada parte. Es un lindo, pobre bicho y para terminar la unidad no se les occurrió algo mejor que ir a ver la muerte de las vacas (conversation with Eduardo Berenblum, May 1, 2004).

When the teacher discovered that one of the children's fathers owned a slaughterhouse, this discovery was thought of as nothing more than the possibility to better prepare the children for adulthood. The boys were shepherded through the various parts of the slaughterhouse, where the slaughter of cows and pigs and their processing was demonstrated. This gruesome field trip is an apt example of the difference between the

American and the Argentine-Uruguayan conception of meat and its origin. The American child is encouraged to think of meat as a commodity spontaneously generated on supermarket shelves. The social relationships that produced this meat are minimized, as are the moments separating the familiar barnyard animal found in storybooks from the meat on the shelves. The divorcing of this commodity from its means of production is possible and even to be expected in the United States, where cattle are concentrated in the midwest and never see the outside of a feedlot. In Argentina and Uruguay, however, meat production and consumption is the stuff of social relationships, and the country makes a living by keeping ever-present the idea of the effort required to turn a calf into a *chorizo*.

Argentines consume 85 to 90% of the beef they produce domestically, or sixty kilograms of meat per Argentine per year. The main public event for the consumption of beef is the *asado*, which is somewhat similar to the American barbeque. The *asado* sets the weekly rhythm for Argentine and Uruguayan life in much the same way that afternoon tea sets the daily rhythm for the English. The ritual of the *asado* is what separates weekday meals consisting largely of beef from weekend and party meals. The *asado* is seen as an unavoidable social fact for people and an unavoidable natural end for animals; a popular saying taken from the book Martín Fierro holds that "todo bicho que camina va a parar al asador." It is important that the *asado* be prepared by men, as it is a rough re-enactment of a gaucho meal and an occasion for the display of masculinity and male bonding. As it is essential both for the flavor and the mystique of the *asado* that it be as low-tech as possible, the beef is cooked on a metal grill placed over wood that has been reduced to the embers state. Men gather at the *parrilla*, or grill, where there is wine

and a wooden cutting board so that pieces of meat may be divided amongst them as the rest cooks. At the *asado* the *parilla* is like a bar where instead of watching sports on television men watch the fire, and instead of drinking alcohol they eat small cuts of meat. The *asado* is also a likely setting for the manly discussion of politics and sports. The women are generally off to the side preparing salads, caring for the children, and chatting. The *asado* is a crucial ritual because it helps to perpetuate the hierarchies existing within society. It is a reinforcement of male dominance in a machismo-fueled culture, and the pairing of this show of dominance with the preparation of meat is telling. Meat is being called upon as a marker for tradition, the status quo. However this symbolism works only as long as meat itself remains unchanged and unthreatened by modern or un-Argentine/non-Uruguayan influences.

Part III: The changing face of the cattle industry and resulting tensions

Increasingly beef consumption represents the ideal and not the reality of Argentine life; Argentines cannot afford the price of domestic beef, and "authentic Argentine beef" is sold to the exterior packaged with the attendant mythology of Argentina's pastoral life and natural beef production. A few decades back beef was representative of the everyman's meal, and laborers and construction workers spent their lunchtimes constructing makeshift *parillas* on which to cook beef; today's worker is much more likely to be carrying a ready-made sandwich. The resulting industry reliance on exports has opened it up to critique and intervention from non-Argentines and non-Uruguayans. The desire to be competitive on the world market has led to a slew of innovations in farming, but many Argentines and Uruguayans refuse to acknowledge that the character of these operations have changed; when asked whether the industry has

changed much in the last fifty years one veterinarian for the Uruguayan government responded "no there have been no major changes, only the application of advanced technology such as artificial insemination, in vitro fertilization, etc" (conversation with Victor Pike).

While in the past cattle roamed over vast expanses of land in the years or months before their shipment to the slaughterhouses, contemporary cattle ranching in Argentina relies increasingly on the intensification of agriculture. This is due largely to the expansion of soybean production to regions of the Pampas suitable for both cattle and crops; the encroachment of crops has pushed cattle into regions of the Pampas where crops do not fare well. Some insist that this intensification is necessary if the industry is to survive and continue expanding, while others worry that it will result in beef that does not stand out from homogeneous beef on the world market (Rearte). Exterior sources warn that "Argentina will have to confront the destruction of the ecosystem by overgrazing, or change the nature of cattle ranching in the country to incorporate more sustainable cultivation practices" (Reed). Locals feel that "there has not been any impact on the environment," as "cows have been grazing in Uruguay (and Argentina) for 400 years" (conversation with Victor Pike). The reluctance to acknowledge the huge leaps made in the industry recently speaks to the grip that the metaphor of meat has on the public consciousness, which feels that it must be natural because it comes naturally to Argentines and Uruguayans.

Finally, some within Argentina and Uruguay have begun agitating for an end to all cattle ranching. These small groups are made up of vegans and vegetarians, who feel that Argentines and Uruguayans must divorce themselves from a system of production

that is cruel regardless of its roots in tradition. These groups are seen as traitors to their heritage and to the large proportion of the population that depends on meat production for its living. The outrage that meets their protests testifies to the passion Argentines and Uruguayans feel for their national vocation, and their terror at the idea of having to define an identity apart from cattle ranching.

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Who is Victor Pike?