

Sarmiento and the Gauchos

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When I quoted Domingo Faustino Sarmiento on the subject of the gauchos in Part III.D of my letter of November 23, 2004 to Dr. Skrbina, I had read only a brief excerpt from Sarmiento's *Civilization y Barbarie*. I've now had an opportunity to read the whole book, which is of considerable interest and therefore perhaps worth the comments offered in this appendix.

Though "gaucho" is commonly translated into English as "an Argentine cowboy," the term was often applied much more broadly; anyone belonging to the rural society and culture of the livestock-raising regions of Argentina or Uruguay could be called a "gaucho," or "gaucha" if female, regardless of whether he or she ever participated personally in herding livestock.¹ It is in this sense that I use the term here.

In my letter to Dr. Skrbina I stated that "Sarmiento was not romanticizing the gaucho," but the editor, Roberto Yahni, of the edition of *Civilización y Barbarie* that I've used, connects Sarmiento with the "romantic esthetic." "2 If exaggeration and the presentation of exceptional cases as if they were typical can be called "romantic," then Sarmiento was indeed guilty of romanticization, as shown by a set of notes³ that Valentin Alsina sent to Sarmiento following the initial publication of *Civilización y Barbarie* in 1845. In the 1851 edition of his book, Sarmiento acknowledged the justice of Alsina's criticisms.⁴ It's obvious, too, that Sarmiento reported many alleged occurrences merely on the basis of hearsay. On the other hand, much of what he said about the gaucho way of life presumably was based on direct observation, for he had evidently had a good deal of personal experience among the gauchos.⁵ It should be noted, however, that Sarmiento never claimed that his picture of gaucho life was fully valid after 1810, the year in which the Argentine war of independence began. Since that time, said Sarmiento, some of the distinguishing features of the rural society that he described had been modified or were slowly changing.⁶

¹ For example, this is how the Uruguayan writer Javier de Viana used "gaucho" in his stories, and Sarmiento's application of the word seems consistent with this usage. The historian John Lynch writes: "By simple definition the gaucho was a free man on horseback. But the term was used by contemporaries and by later historians to mean rural people in general." John Lynch, Chapt. 3, section "Gauchos and Peons," p. 40. Mayo, pp. 151-54, discusses the vague and variable meanings of "gaucho" and is not himself consistent in applying the term, *ibid.*, e.g., pp. 110-11, 162, 182, 203, 228. For instance, on p. 135 Mayo refers to slaves as "black gauchos," but on p. 209 he seems to distinguish slaves from gauchos. I see no point in concerning myself with these questionable distinctions, so I use "gaucho" in its most general sense. But wealthy absentee ranchowners who lived in the city much of the time do not qualify as gauchos.

² Sarmiento, pp. 13, 15-16.

³ See *ibid.*, Nota 2, pp. 380-83; Nota 35, pp. 423-24.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 184-86, editor's footnote d.

⁵ Sarmiento had often watched the moon rise over the Pampas, *ibid.*, p. 61. About 1826, Sarmiento spent a year in the Sierra de San Luis, where he taught several adults from high-status (*pudientes*) gaucho families to read, *ibid.*, p. 70n*. In 1838, Sarmiento was staying at an isolated ranch (*estancia*) in the same Sierra, *ibid.*, pp. 70-71. And Sarmiento reported personal observation of a gaucho's tracking skills, *ibid.*, pp. 82-83.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 104.

The Argentine historian Carlos A. Mayo has carried out a sober study, based on documentary evidence, of gaucho life in the province of Buenos Aires from 1740 to 1820.⁷ Is Sarmiento's account consistent with Mayo's conclusions? As noted above, Sarmiento often portrays exceptional cases as if they were typical, but if these portrayals are taken merely as vignettes descriptive of particular times and places rather than as general descriptions of gaucho life, then Sarmiento's work does not appear to be seriously inconsistent with Mayo's as far as facts are concerned,⁸ though, as one would expect, Mayo's book lacks the dramatic quality of Sarmiento's.

But what about the statement that I quoted in my letter of November 23, 2004, to Dr. Skrbina? The gaucho, wrote Sarmiento, is "strong, haughty, energetic... he is happy in the midst of his poverty and his privations ...".⁹ How accurate was this statement?

Sarmiento portrays the gaucho male as indolent, as hardly working at all, while the burden of providing the necessities of life fell almost entirely on the women,¹⁰ and it's hard to reconcile this with his description of the (male) gaucho as "strong and energetic." Sarmiento's picture of the idle gaucho no doubt was accurate at some times and places, for most gauchos didn't care to work for an employer when they didn't have to¹¹—some probably never worked for an employer at all¹²—and they commonly spent a good deal of time drinking and gambling.¹³ But at other times they did work, and work hard, and their work often required them to be decidedly strong and energetic, as well as skillful.¹⁴ It's possible that, in the typical case, the gaucho did not have a superabundance of leisure time, if one counts as "work" not only work done for an employer but all activities—legal or not—that were undertaken to

⁷ Mayo, *Estancia y Sociedad*, as in our List of Works Cited.

⁸ This is all the more true when one takes into account the fact that Mayo's study is mostly confined to the province of Buenos Aires, whereas Sarmiento was born in San Juan province (Sarmiento, p. 22), therefore more than 250 miles from the nearest point of Buenos Aires province; and Sarmiento had had considerable experience in the Sierra de San Luis (ibid., pp. 70-71 & n*), nearly 200 miles from the nearest point of Buenos Aires province. Nothing that Sarmiento may have observed well outside Buenos Aires province can be called inconsistent with Mayo's study, because Mayo's study is not applicable to such observations.

⁹ Sarmiento, p. 74.

¹⁰ Ibid., pp. 71-72, 74. The gaucha (gaucho woman) did indeed do a great deal of productive work, Mayo, pp. 165-178, but perhaps did not, in the typical case, work as hard as one might infer from Sarmiento's account, for Mayo, p. 178, says that a contemporary description of the rural woman as "inactive and indolent" was "only partly true."

¹¹ Mayo, *passim*, e.g., pp. I 05-08, 138, 156-57, 204, 222. Duarte, p. 37n53.

¹² It was possible for gauchos to spend much (if not all) of their time as "vagabonds," Mayo, pp. 151-163, because there was "direct access to the basic means of subsistence" (such as meat), Brittez, pp. 198-99; Mayo, pp. 36, 104, 138, 234. Stray (Mayo, e.g., pp. 113-14) or stolen (see note 15, below) livestock were a source not only of meat but of money or trade goods. And many gauchos had small or medium-sized ranches or farms of their own, e.g., Mayo, pp. 56, 214; Cabrejas, p. 45, hence would not necessarily have had to work for an employer, though the smallest ranchers or farmers might have found it necessary to supplement their income with some wage-labor, Mayo, p. 111.

¹³ Mayo, e.g., pp. 115, 124, 152, 156, 157, 160, 193.

¹⁴ Ibid., pp. 124-26, 200-02, 204.

procure the necessities of life; for many gauchos supported themselves at times by stealing livestock,¹⁵ or else by growing crops or raising livestock on their own.¹⁶

Were the gauchos “haughty”? In this context, “arrogant” might have been a better translation of the Spanish *altivo*. In Mayo’s account the gauchos certainly seem to have been arrogant. They were “indomitable;” they had a “stern and vindictive look;” they “knew neither fear nor submission;” they were “insolent and jealous of their autonomy;” they were “not accustomed to obey or to accept dependence.”¹⁷ On the other hand, their arrogance may have evaporated when they were brought before a judge to answer for their alleged or (more likely) their real crimes.¹⁸

But was the gaucho “happy in the midst of his poverty and his privations”? “Happiness” is such a vague concept that it is virtually impossible to deal with it objectively. It would be better to speak in terms of relatively definite factors such as the presence or absence of anxiety, stress, depression, or dissatisfaction. Mayo gives us no direct evidence as to anxiety, stress, or depression. What we can say objectively is that most gauchos were not seriously dissatisfied with their “poverty” and their “privations,” since they made little effort to remedy these even when they could easily have done so. This is shown by the fact that there was no strong correlation between economic means and what is commonly called “material standard of living,” for even relatively wealthy gauchos tended to accept and live with the same “privations” as poor ones did.¹⁹ When, during the second half of the 19th century, those who had the means began to spend heavily on material goods, it’s likely that they were seeking primarily social status rather than physical comfort or security.²⁰

Beyond this, all we have is Sarmiento’s personal impression that the gaucho was “happy” with his “poverty” and his “privations.” This impression can’t be attributed to any sort of idealization of the gaucho, for Sarmiento’s hostility to gaucho values and his passionate commitment to economic and technological progress are evident throughout his book.

¹⁵ Ibid., e.g., pp. 73, 157-160.

¹⁶ Ibid., pp. 73-86, 157.

¹⁷ Ibid., pp. 117, 131, 193, 200, 203, 210. Duart, p. 37n53.

¹⁸ Mayo, pp. 157-160.

¹⁹ Ibid., pp. 41-43. Cabrejas, pp. 46-47, 54, 59-61, 69. Correa & Wibaux, pp. 80-81. Brittez, pp. 186-87. Mayo, “Conclusiones,” in Mayo, *Vivir en la frontera*, pp. 161-62. John Lynch, Chapt. 3, section “The Social Divide,” p. 38 (“indifferent to material comforts”). Here our concern is mainly with the late colonial period up to 1810; as noted in the third paragraph of this appendix, Sarmiento never claimed that his portrayal of gaucho life was fully valid after 1810. Nevertheless, there were exceptions even before 1810. E.g., Cabrejas, p. 56.

²⁰ Brittez, p. 199 (“Social actors consciously used material goods to construct and show status ...”). Even before 1850, when money was spent for anything beyond minimal physical necessities, it seems that the motive often was status rather than physical comfort or security. E.g., Correa & Wibaux, pp. 80-81 (golden buttons), 82; Brittez, p. 187 (silver horse-trappings); Mayo, “Conclusiones,” in Mayo, *Vivir en la frontera*, pp. 162-63 (silver spurs).

And there the matter rests. But let's close with a brief description, by several Argentine scholars, of the "inorganic democracy" of the gauchos:

The human type that constituted the popular Creole strata [meaning mainly the gauchos] did not correspond with the image of the man subject to authority of the traditional kind, though in most aspects of his life he was the bearer of traditional cultural norms. Due to the peculiarities of his manner of living, he was instead an anarchic individualist, attached to his personal independence and prepared to acknowledge the authority only of those who possessed to an outstanding degree the qualities that he most esteemed; for example, personal skill and courage. The autocratic authority of the *caudillos* [rough, irregular military leaders, largely independent of any civil authority] was not based on any *traditional legitimacy*, but on its acceptance by these groups that saw in the *caudillos* their own image and the exaltation of their own values. This was called *inorganic democracy* (O.L. Romero), and the term is probably acceptable, *provided it's recognized that along with these traits all the other elements of the traditional man survived: social and ecological isolation, ethnocentrism, religiosity* (not exactly the sophisticated religion of the cities, however), *resistance to change, predominance of custom and of 'prescriptive action,' subsistence economy and the corresponding attitudes in regard to work and economic activity.*²¹

²¹ Tella, Germani, Graciarena, et al., pp. 212-13.

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