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Author(s): Madaline W. Nichols

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The Gaucho*

Madaline W. Nichols

The gaucho may be roughly defined as the vagabond horseman of the Plata plains. The very name of gaucho has been seriously ascribed to the fact that that individual is extreme in his awkwardness (*i.e.*, *gauche*) when off a horse. Whether or no one may care to accept such an etymology for his name, the fact remains that a gaucho without a horse lacks an integral part of his personality. Again, to be true to type, the gaucho must be a mobile individual, and this characteristic of mobility has been suggested in some of the several possible Indian sources for his name. Other elements will assuredly enter the definition: an independent spirit; a variable amount of skill in the handling of such implements of his trade as the lasso, bolas, knife, and guitar, or in the mastery of his natural environment; an interest in such things as cattle, mules, Indians. These are but a few of the gaucho attributes, but behind and under these characteristics are to be found the gaucho horse and the gaucho use of that horse in a vagabond life.

Unfortunately, writers upon the subject of the gaucho have seemed to catch the contagion of one of the main characteristics of the object of their study. It is not enough that the gaucho himself was a vagabond, constantly elusive creature who continually changed in the less essential elements of his type and refused to lend himself to rule, but he seems to have infused that same unruly spirit in those who try to write about him. Not only do writers disagree with one another on almost every possible phase of the gaucho problem, but some writers can actually be found who disagree even with themselves. Over

*This paper was read at the annual meeting of the Pacific Coast Branch of the American Historical Association, at Santa Barbara in December, 1935. [Editor].

twenty-five sources have been suggested for the very term *gaucho*,¹ but its actual etymology is still undetermined. So a gaucho may be *gauche*; he may derive his name from his peculiar cattle call or from the Araucanian word for the solitary ostrich egg; he may be gypsy or Arabic or Indian; he may come from Andalusia or Brazil or the Canary Islands; finally, as indicated by the Latin verb *gaudeo*, he may be merely an individual who enjoys his ride over the beautiful Argentine plains! In further illustration of the general lack of agreement on the subject of the gaucho, it may be mentioned that one can find reputable writers who will state that the gaucho was and was not patriotic; that he did and did not represent an ethnic mixture; that he owed his origin exclusively to Uruguay and exclusively to Argentina; that he was and was not of use to society, etc. Some have even had the temerity to argue the gaucho love for his horse. The real gaucho may be dying, but the elusiveness of his character, his lawlessness, still seem to tend to live on in those who write about him.

An explanation for this diversity in the treatment of the gaucho is possibly to be found in an undue complication of definition. The concept *gaucho* is made to include too many gauchos and too many periods. The gaucho was a product of his environment; as it changed, he changed in the more superficial attributes of his character. Those changing attributes were the more picturesque and therefore the more readily remembered elements of the concept. One can only start with a basic definition and then stretch it into an adjustment to a constantly changing individual in a constantly differing world.

As the original gaucho rode a horse and chased a cow, I believe that we must follow the Spanish horse if we are to find the origin of the gaucho name and gaucho person. It is not enough to say that the colonizing expedition of Pedro de Mendoza brought horses to the Plata region, that these horses were eventually turned loose upon the pampa and multiplied, and that presently the gaucho sat upon them. One must re-

¹Arturo Costa Alvarez, "Las etimologías de *gaucho*," in *Nosotros* (Buenos Aires), LIV, 183-209 (October, 1926).

member that the Mendoza colonists and their Indian neighbors were often very hungry; that under such conditions the chances for the survival of the horse in any other form than steak were negligible; and also that there were other horses in South America, some of which may well have eventually attained the freedom of the plains.

When Juan de Garay refounded Buenos Aires in 1580, he found the pampa teeming with horses. From where had they come? Certainly not exclusively from the Mendoza expedition. In both east and west there were other expeditions which must have been of at least equal importance. The horses that travelled on such tours as those of Cabeza de Vaca and Juan de Ayolas and Irala could not have been utter slackers, and surely the horses of the Almagro expedition from Peru to Chile via western Argentina and those of the numerous expeditions which kept bumping into one another in the old colonial province of Tucumán² must bear a goodly share of the responsibility. Of even greater importance, in that they were definitely turned loose upon the plains, were those horses which the Araucanian Indians took from Valdivia and his men.³ This new picture,

² Colonial Tucumán included the settlements founded from Peru in northwestern Argentina. A part of southern Bolivia and some seven modern Argentine provinces, including the modern province of Tucumán, are now included in the region.

³ The historian, Ruy Díaz de Guzmán, wrote that five mares and seven horses were left behind when the Mendoza settlement at Buenos Aires was abandoned in 1541. These horses were reported to have multiplied to such an extent that by 1612 they seemed "great mountains," and, significantly, they were found on the plains "as far as the cordillera." It does not seem reasonable to suppose that if these horses had entered from the east they would have moved westward, away from their best grazing ground and water supply.

The following dates of foundations of towns and of east-west and north-south travel are also of significance.

Asunción was founded in 1536, Santiago del Estero in 1553, Mendoza in 1561, San Juan in 1562, Tucumán in 1564, Córdoba and Santa Fé in 1573. The majority of the early permanent settlements, then, were in the western country, and the settlers came from Peru and from Chile. For approximately two hundred years Argentina turned her back to the Atlantic and faced the west.

In the matter of cross-country travel, Diego Almagro passed through Jujuy, Salta, and Catamarca en route from Peru to Chile in 1536; Diego de Rojas and Juan Núñez de Prado were in Tucumán in 1543 and 1550 respectively; from Chile to this Tucumán country came Francisco de Villagrán and Francisco de Aguirre (c. 1552). In Chile itself, Pedro de Valdivia was defeated in 1553 by the Araucanian chief, Lautaro, who immediately manifested a keen interest in the Indian acquisition of horses. From the east

then, is one of horses – horses coming from the north and horses from the west and horses from the south – all drifting into the natural grazing ground of the Argentine pampa.

Before a gaucho sat upon these horses, he had to have a specific reason for his ride. That reason involved the matter of hunting expeditions for the hides of wild cattle and horses and, later, of such more prosaic matters as the actual raising of cattle, the cattle and mule industry in its relationship to transportation, and the leather business. Here our attention again turns to the west and Tucumán, where cattle raising flourished long before the time of Garay, and where the Indians, though fierce, did not so completely repress the population and keep the evolving gaucho from beginning his ride. There are early records of large stocking even of Paraguay with cattle from this western country and from Upper Peru.⁴

South America centered on Peru, the seat of the viceroyalty and the land of the mines. Peru furnished a market for meat; Peru needed mules for her mines. But the natural conditions for the supplying of this market were not favorable in Peru, and the records of colonial times are full of the story, first of the spread of stock into the pampa, its best natural environment, and then of a return flow of trade into the best market.⁵ The great interior market of Salta grew up, and Tucumán thrived. The mule trade with Peru became an institution of distinguished proportions. The economic center of Argentina

Domingo Martínez de Irala went west in 1546, and in an expedition of 1550 he was reported to have taken along more than six hundred horses; Juan de Ayolas visited the Chaco country in the years from 1537 to 1539; Alvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca and Nuflo de Chaves travelled westward in 1541 and in 1557 respectively; Captain Salazar and Ruy Díaz Melgarejo moved into Paraguay in 1556; Felipe de Cáceres came east in the years from 1566 to 1572.

In short, other expeditions and other horses besides those of Mendoza had been in the country; the majority were in the western, not the eastern, part.

⁴ Víctor Arreguine, *Historia del Uruguay* (Montevideo, 1892). On page 45 there is an account of a shipment of eight thousand head of stock into Paraguay from Charcas as late as 1587, despite the fact that Asunción had been the earliest permanent settlement in the east.

⁵ Concolorcorvo (Bustamante Carlos, Calixto), *El lazarrillo de ciegos caminantes desde Buenos Aires hasta Lima. 1773*. See Buenos Aires. Junta de historia y numismática americana, *Biblioteca*, iv (Buenos Aires, 1908).

in colonial times lay in her province of Tucumán, and the very industries upon which that economic life was founded – raw-hides, cattle, mules, transportation, leather – involved the gaucho.

The philological evidence supports the historical and economic in this thesis of the importance of the west in any consideration of gaucho origin. When one considers that the first gauchos were called *gauderios* or *guasos*, the fact that the modern Chilean counterpart of the gaucho is still a *guaso* is not without significance, especially if one considers the Peruvian-Chilean movement through Tucumán. The philological relationship between *guaso* and *gaucho* seems to have been close. The general consensus of opinion is that both words revert to a common Indian source which led to *guaso* on one hand and to the doublet, *guacho* and *gaucho*, on the other. This seems all the more possible in that the *gaucho* and the *guaso* shared many of the attributes of the vagabond, orphan *guacho*.⁶ The term *gauderio* involves a parallel Brazilian development, but the definition of the name indicates that the *gauderio* was a far less respected element of society than the *guaso*. He was not only a vagabond collector of hides, but he did that collecting without the proper legal permits, and he won his living at the expense of others. He was fundamentally a parasite. It is interesting to note that the movement which the *gauderio* represents gave way before the superior advance of its rival to the west, just as the superior thrills of the “bootleg” trade in hides yielded to a decrease in the commodity itself, an increase in law enforcement, and the economic pressure of a steady, legitimate market in Peru.

Names follow institutions, do not precede them. The term *gaucho*, in the form *guaso*, enters the Plata literature with a poem of 1777 and Cevallos' expedition against Brazil sup-

⁶ See Emilio Corbière, *El gaucho. Desde su origen hasta nuestros días* (Buenos Aires, 1929).

Also see D. Zorobabel Rodríguez, quoted in Daniel Granada, *Vocabulario rioplatense razonado* (Montevideo, 1890). In his consideration of the word *guacho*, Señor Rodríguez lists aimará *huajcha* (poor orphan), quichua *huaccha* (orphan), araucano *huachu* (illegitimate son).

ported by guaso cavalry. Again, the fact that the first of the many gaucho newspapers was called *El arriero* (The muleteer) is also worth at least some passing interest. With the creation of the viceroyalty of Buenos Aires in 1776 records report a remarkable increase in population, an immigratory movement largely from the west.⁷ It cannot be without significance that it is only immediately after this period that the first gaucho, so called, first appears on the Plata scene. He wore the Quechuan *chiripá*, and with him came his lady, still known by her Quechuan name of *china*.⁸ Like the horse and the cow, once the gaucho arrived in the environment best suited to him, he centered there and prospered.

By the year 1800 our gaucho was well established in the Plata region. Generally of mestizo descent, he could find no means of livelihood in town, where unskilled labor fell to the lot of slaves, nor was he interested in such labor. The open country supported him. Transportation was furnished by the wild horses he caught and trained; his saddle, the blanket he carried under it, and his poncho gave him pillow and bed; with bolas and lasso he caught the cattle which was his food; he made his own law and backed it with his power to wield the knife; his skill in song and the use of his guitar won him the respectful admiration of his fellows and the offer of hospitality in any rancho at which he might call. When in need of money to bet upon the swiftness of his horse or to deck it with the proper silver trappings, the gaucho broke horses for some hacendero or possibly joined one of the cattle hunting expeditions. If life proved too uneventful, our gaucho left for

⁷ José Manuel Estrada, *Obras completas. Fragmentos históricos*, v (Buenos Aires, 1901). For the year 1744 the author notes a population in the city of Buenos Aires of 10,223 and a population of 6033 in the surrounding countryside. His figures for the year 1778 are 24,754 and 15,425 respectively.

⁸ See D. Marcos Jiménez de la Espada, quoted in Daniel Granada, *Vocabulario rioplatense razonado* (Montevideo, 1890).

"La segunda manera de ministros (del templo del Cuzco) quiso (Pachacuti Inga) que fuesen vírgenes escogidas, hermosas y de sangre noble, llamadas *acllas*, esto es, electas y consagradas al sol; y así se llamaban ellas *intiñ chinan* o *punchas chinan*, esto es, criadas del sol, siervas de la luz del día."

the wars: he followed San Martín to Chile; he assured Argentine independence when he repulsed the invading Peruvian royalists in Tucumán; he fought the Portuguese in Uruguay, the Indian on the frontier, his fellow gaucho in the civil wars. Life was pleasant in its self-sufficiency and freedom.

The gaucho was a man of three loves: his horse, his country, his lady. These are stated in the order of their relative importance; the horse came first. Félix de Azara called attention to the fact that man's sovereign passions may be deduced from the marks he leaves behind him; cut into the bark of Paraguayan trees Azara found no hearts or initials, but only those marks with which horses and cattle were branded! Again, in one of the better known gaucho verses, the gaucho laments the fact that his horse and his woman have departed for the town of Salta, and he then expresses a fervent prayer for the speedy return of the horse! ⁹

And well may the horse have come first. It was involved in the very origin and existence of the gaucho; it was fundamental in the gaucho cavalry hordes which fought during approximately a quarter of the national history; in its relation to the cattle business it was fundamental in the economic life; it had its influence upon the formation of classes and the fabric of rural society; it made possible the economic independence of the gaucho and led to an individual independence of spirit which is still characteristic of the national psychologies of the Plata region. The gauchos regarded a man without a horse as a man without legs.

⁹ For two versions of this *copla*, see Juan Carlos Dávalos, *Los gauchos* (Buenos Aires, 1928), p. 53.

“Mi mujer y mi caballo
se me fueron para Salta,
como mi caballo vuelva
mi mujer no me hace falta.”

And *Ciro Bayo*, *Romancerillo del Plata* (Madrid, 1913), p. 213.

“Mi mujer y mi caballo
se me murieron a un tiempo;
¡ qué mujer ni qué demonio!
¡ mi caballo es lo que siento!”

In his love for his country the gaucho interpreted "patriotism" in such terms as he could understand. To him, "country" was translated "*pago*," one's own little corner of the world, the section which he personally knew. To defend it from any foreigner he joyfully went to war, or, in appreciative respect for its local leader, he was willing to follow and serve in support of any cause that leader might choose to sponsor. The gaucho played a vital part in the winning and holding of independence; again, without him, the long dictatorship of Juan Manuel de Rosas would have been impossible. The gaucho turbulence of spirit still survives in the even present appreciative respect for revolution as a proper mode of political reform. Also, though quite unwillingly, the gaucho extended the boundaries of the larger, and to him incomprehensible national whole, when in the drafted armies he held and stretched the Indian border line and settled the frontier.

With the gaucho love for his *china* is related the question of the ethnic composition of rural society. It is true that, in general, gaucho society was a mestizo society, a mingling of races with all the resultant psychological complications for the future. Not only was the gaucho's lady of value in this making of a new race, but she was of esthetic importance as well. Many of the fundamental folk *motifs* of the life and literature of the region turn on the gaucho's *china*; the use of certain verse and dance forms; the *payada* or contest in verse; the love element in gaucho literature.

Like the gaucho and his *littérateurs*, gaucho literature resists regulation. It varies in three general lines, however, dependent upon topic, historical conditions, and literary treatment. In topic it may reflect the folklore of the people, portray love or patriotism, describe or criticize society. Historical conditions are reflected in the many gaucho newspapers with their criticism of society and expression of patriotism. The works of literature, more properly speaking, followed European literary fashions and were romantic, realistic, naturalistic, etc., in sympathetic reflection of that literary barometer. Illustrative of

the phases of the astonishing amount of this gaucho literature are the folk verse, or *coplas*; the patriotic verse of Hilario Ascasubi and his romantic legend of the mythical bard or *payador*, Santos Vega; the realism of José Hernández' *Martín Fierro* and Domingo Faustino Sarmiento's *Facundo*; the renewed romanticism of the poet, Rafael Obligado; the continued realism of the dramatist, Florencio Sánchez and of the novelists, Ricardo Güiraldes and Roberto Payró. Finally, there came such exaggeration as that reflected in the gaucho novel of Eduardo Gutiérrez or in such naturalistic prose as Payró's *Casamiento de Laucha* where the gaucho has degenerated even to the loss of his horse.

Like everything else connected with the gaucho, the attitude of society toward him continually changed. When considered useful or in harmony with a prevalent literary tradition, he was admired; when considered valueless, he was despised. When the gaucho first entered the picture he was a lawless, reckless vagabond, hired to ride to cattle hunts; he was as feared and as hard to control as the wild Indian he so closely resembled. With the period of wars and romanticism he became highly respectable, and while society may have roundly cursed his lawlessness behind his back, it cheered him quite as loudly when he rode off to the wars. For example, the gaucho army of Martín Miguel Güemes, that Argentine hero who closed Argentina's door in the face of invading Peruvian royalists, was composed of just such national heroes. The advent of the romantic movement in literature emphasized and exaggerated this appreciation of the picturesque though uncomfortable gaucho. However, as gaucho armies surged back and forth across the country in civil war, as the stabilizing influence of the European immigrant began to make itself felt in rural society, as the cattle business changed in character and came to call for other and different aptitudes than those of the primitive hunter, the gaucho became disgraced in the eyes of society. Faced with ever-increasing difficulty in surviving, he became either actually an enemy, harmful to society, or he changed in

character to such an extent that he could no longer be called a gaucho. Reversing its usual procedure, the butterfly had become a worm.

The contribution of the gaucho to the Plata society has been great. It is true that his exaggerated independence was non-social; that his support of rival caudillos is behind a long period of anarchy; that his hatred of and opposition to the foreigner and his ways have also had a retarding influence on progress. But, in contrast, one may say that the gaucho bore a large share in the protection and actual settlement of the frontier; he was largely involved in the social mixing of rural society, the amalgamation of the Indian; he played one of the largest parts in the winning of independence from Spain; he was directly, though unconsciously, responsible in the establishment of the large stock industry which persists to the present day; he presented a distinctive theme for the literature and art of the Plata region. The gaucho theatre, in its development from the circus, is one of the most picturesque of contributions to literature; the gaucho paintings of Bernaldo de Quirós, and José Hernández' literary masterpiece, *Martín Fierro*, are contributions to world culture of which any nation might well be proud. Again, in such intangible psychological elements as the independent confidence and optimistic self-sufficiency which are generally considered as characteristic of Argentina, the gaucho may well have more than played his part. In the larger whole of Hispanic American life he symbolizes that struggle between urban and rural society which persists even to the present day.

MADALINE W. NICHOLS

Berkeley, California