

RURAL HISTORY OF THE
RIO DE LA PLATA, 1600–1850:
Results of a Historiographical Renaissance*

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In the last ten years, the rural history of the colonial Río de la Plata and to a lesser extent that of the first half of the nineteenth century have witnessed an unprecedented boom. Research projects, new sets of questions, and the utilization of new sources and methodologies have all proliferated. Today we have undoubtedly come a long way in our understanding of these issues from where we were only a decade ago.

In reality, the beginning of a new era in studies of the Río de la Plata countryside should be dated even further back, with the publication of an article by Tulio Halperín analyzing for the first time the functioning of an *estancia* based on accounting records (Halperín 1975). This work was originally presented in Rome in 1972, at a meeting sponsored by the Comisión de Historia Económica de CLACSO entitled “Haciendas, Latifundios y Plantaciones.” After the conference, historiographical production on the Latin American rural world in general grew at a dizzying pace but not on the Río de la Plata region. Halperín’s work did not catch on in his own country, perhaps because of the political circumstances that Argentina was enduring in the dark years following publication of the article on “Fontezuela” (Halperín 1975). Since 1984, however, new advances in rural studies on the Río de la Plata have been appearing continuously and stimulating lively debates. This historiographical production has flourished in part thanks to the recent conditions prevailing in universities and educational institutions on both sides of the Río de la Plata. University research institutes and the journals they are publishing on a regular basis have become essential points of entry into current thinking on the region’s past.

As our bibliography attests, the number of publications is now sizable, although some of these studies are still unpublished or have circulated only as reports or working papers. From these works an image

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of the Río de la Plata countryside emerges that differs considerably from the one held by historians until a few years ago. These works have also raised new questions about the years between 1650 and 1800 and subsequent development in the region. We shall attempt here to present a brief inventory of these advances and research issues.

It is necessary at the outset to clarify what we mean by “the Río de la Plata” as the region under study. We are not referring to what once included the vast expanse of the Viceroyalty of the Río de la Plata but rather to the zone bordering the river itself, an area with a set of distinct ecological and historical characteristics defining its rural history. Basically, the Río de la Plata includes what today is the republic of Uruguay along with the Argentine provinces of Buenos Aires, Santa Fé, Entre Ríos, and the southern part of Córdoba. The bibliographic references listed deal primarily with Buenos Aires and southwest Uruguay, the regions most frequently discussed in the recent research. This limited coverage immediately points toward one of our main conclusions regarding future research needs.

The underlying causes of this historiographical renaissance are a subject beyond the purpose and scope of the present article. Nevertheless, we think it important to indicate at least three such causes.

First, a reassessment began in the 1970s of internal markets as a vital factor for understanding Latin American economic development since the colonial era. The most influential works in this area have been those of Carlos Sempat Assadourian (Assadourian 1983). While scholars were studying the Atlantic export market in hides and other cattle by-products from the region, they also began to focus on the growing and marketing of agricultural products bound for local and regional markets.

A second relevant factor in this renaissance has been reconsideration of the role and characteristics of the state and the colonial elites in comparison with the national period. Colonial elites were basically commercial, and the colonial state was primarily interested in continuing the development of activities related to mining (see Assadourian 1983; Socolow 1978, 1989). These findings have made it possible to study the *estancieros* (large-scale ranchers) emerging at the end of the eighteenth century in a new light and to reassess their conflicts with the mercantile sectors.

Finally, systematic utilization of massive primary sources on the rural world by applying suitable methodologies has made it possible to reread and reinterpret Río de la Plata history and has allowed old and new images to mingle, now supported by a more solid base than mere commentaries on colonial reports written by travelers and officials. The most important and frequently consulted sources have been estancia records, *diezmos* (the tenth paid to the Spanish Crown on crop production), *alcabalas* (sales taxes), population and agricultural censuses, parish regis-

ters, and inventories. The remarkable thing (which shows the new line of inquiry taken by most recent publications) is that some of the sources now being examined afresh have been in print for several decades.

Rural Production

Until a few years ago, when historians talked about the colonial and postcolonial countryside around the Río de la Plata, they identified it with cows and more cows—perhaps also admitting to a few mules and sheep. But farming was not the business of those living along the Río de la Plata, who ate nothing but meat and detested farm work more than anything (see as examples Levene 1927–1928; J. A. García 1900; Giberti 1974; Sala de Touron, de la Torre, and Rodríguez 1967, 1968, 1978; and Barrán and Nahum 1963). A few exceptions pointed out the existence of a more diversified agrarian economy toward the end of the colonial era (see Halperín 1972; Weinberg 1956), but in some instances they did so to explain the precarious nature of such farming and farmers and the fore-ordained impossibility of prospering. As Weinberg commented, the object was to explain “the tragedy of colonial farming.”

Today we know that the situation was not that bad. From early colonization at the end of the sixteenth century onward, the importance of wheat in the local economy was far from negligible (González Lebrero 1993, 1994). For the eighteenth century, it has been possible to determine that some two-thirds of the diezmos in the late-colonial Río de la Plata region paid under the heading of agricultural production were levied on grains, wheat in particular. Vegetable raising was also a significant activity (Garavaglia 1985, 1989a; Gelman 1989b). Bread suddenly began to appear on local tables, and residents started eating squash, watermelons, poultry, onions, beans, and corn.

As has happened regarding other regions, considerable debate has arisen over the value of diezmos as sources for measuring agrarian production (compare Garavaglia 1985, 1989a; Amaral and Ghio 1990; García Belsunce 1988). Yet the utilizing of more reliable sources like records of diezmos collected directly over a period of years, census lists of farming operations, and inventories has merely confirmed the first impression of an agrarian economy that had diversified by the end of the colonial period. At the regional economic level, cattle raising and wheat growing seem to have been the main activities—of equal importance and complementary in a certain sense. But other cattle-related activities also appeared in addition to raising cows, along with an array of grain and fodder cultivation, fruit and vegetable growing, and poultry raising (see Gelman 1992b; Canedo 1993c; Di Stefano 1988).

These “discoveries” have obliged historians to reconsider almost

the entire rural history of the colonial Río de la Plata and to try to capture the tensions that must have arisen during the transition from the colonial era to the first decades of the national period, when an apparently less diversified agricultural economy was being consolidated.¹ We say “apparently” because official discourse during the first half of the nineteenth century and the literature written on that period have presented a monocultural economy geared around raising cattle for export. Some recent studies have taken a more nuanced view of the situation in showing that the transition was neither as rapid nor as complete as might be assumed (Brown 1979; Mateo 1993c).²

It became clear that monoculture was not the situation at the end of the colonial period, and this finding raised several questions right away. If historians were convinced that the gauchos were not farmers, then who was growing those tens of thousands of bushels of wheat? How did the labor cycles for the various activities mesh, conflict, or coordinate? How did the different agricultural products access land and markets? Did specialization develop according to region and the type of operations dedicated to one activity or another?

Types of Farming and Ranching Operations

Accompanying the perception of a monocultural cattle economy from colonial times until at least the mid-nineteenth century was the image dominating the literature of a powerful class of estancieros who were monopolizing land and livestock and trying to employ the rest of the population as *conchabados* (contract laborers). This population consisted essentially of gauchos, who were rather antisocial and likely to run off with the Indians or to rustle some of the abundant herds of cattle roaming freely over the countryside. Gauchos would hire themselves out as farm laborers only when they needed commodities not supplied by the great generosity of nature in the Río de la Plata region, such as wine, brandy, tobacco, or yerba mate. Here too a few exceptions appeared in the Argentine historiography, especially in the Uruguayan literature, which had to explain Artiguismo and its so-called land reform.³ These exceptions recognized the existence in colonial times of a somewhat more complex agrarian society that included small-scale herders and farmers

1. We put *discoveries* in quotes because a few authors had already noted in some manner the existence of a more diversified economy. It should be emphasized, however, that fairly reliable figures are only beginning to be attached to these phenomena and integrated into a broader and more complex whole.

2. Jonathan Brown's (1979) book, one of the few exceptions that portrayed a rather different image of the Buenos Aires countryside in the first half of the nineteenth century, still has not been translated into Spanish, more than fifteen years after it appeared in English.

3. In 1988 Guillermo Vázquez Franco published his book questioning for the first time (to our knowledge) the nature of Gervasio de Artigas's "land reform." Vázquez Franco took the position that the "Reglamento del año 15" primarily expressed the needs of the estancieros.

(see Weinberg 1956; Halperín 1972; Barrán and Nahum 1963; Sala de Touron, de la Torre, and Rodríguez 1978). But even these studies pointed out the great power of *estancieros* in the colonial period and the intrinsic weakness of small producers. The implication was that the expansion of the great *estancias* in the nineteenth century and their owners' attainment of political power were simply the continuation and consolidation of a situation existing since time immemorial.

Recent studies reveal a very different picture, although some contemporary authors still insist on the near total dominance of the great colonial "semi-feudal" *estancieros*. These assessments have reformulated according to leftist perspectives some of the traditional schema of Ricardo Levene, which date back seventy years (compare Levene 1927 with Azcuy Améghino and Martínez Dougnac 1989).⁴

In the first place, analysis of inventories of late-colonial "estancias" (meaning productive establishments as defined in Garavaglia 1993c) has revealed that these operations were comparatively modest: the value of the largest ones (except in a few unusual instances) could hardly be compared with that of an ordinary general store in town (Mayo and Fernández 1988; Garavaglia 1993c). Thus the large colonial *estancias* of Buenos Aires seem to have been the exceptions to the rule. By the end of the eighteenth century, the Banda Oriental already contained some large-scale *estancias* with tens of thousands of animals, but even there, some of these estates concealed a more complicated internal productive situation that included *arrendatarios* (leaseholders), *medieros* (tenant farmers), and even slaves who had the right to cultivate their own parcels (Gelman 1989a, 1992b). More significantly, these large *estancias* were surrounded by a multitude of small cattle and farming units that could compete with the *estancias* in good circumstances, which varied according to the times, the region, and the product.

In some instances, it has been possible to measure the magnitude of these large and small farms. Conditions seem to have been fairly similar in the Buenos Aires countryside and the Colonia region of the Banda Oriental. First, however, it is necessary to distinguish between cattle ranching and wheat farming.

As far as ranching is concerned, there seems to have been a fairly high concentration of cattle on a few of the "large ranches" (*estancias* with more than a thousand head, far from the image of the great nineteenth-century *estancia*). At the same time, countless small and tiny ranches were operating with hundreds or even a few dozen cattle (Gelman 1992b; Garavaglia 1993c).

With wheat, the situation differed considerably. Although the large

4. This subject would require a detailed discussion that cannot be attempted within the confines of this article.

estancias grew wheat, most harvesting took place on tiny family farms (Gelman 1992b; Di Stefano 1988). Relevant regional differences emerged, and they will be discussed later. The most compelling example is the land on the outskirts of Buenos Aires. It had been turned into wheat-growing *chacras* (fields for annual crops), which were owned by influential individuals from the city or by local “farmers” and yielded far more wheat than the small farms.⁵ Nevertheless, these landowners would often lease part of their arable lands to small-scale *campesinos* to reduce the risks of farming.

In addition to studying differences in products and regions, it is also essential to examine changes that occurred over time. Although the conclusions in this regard have been less definite so far, historians can see that the eighteenth century, especially the last quarter, witnessed significant growth in the number of large cattle-raising estancias, especially in the Banda Oriental. This growth was inspired by the extraordinary increase in opportunities for exporting hides and (to a lesser extent) salted meat. Yet this late-colonial growth in estancias does not appear to have come at the expense of *campesinos*. On the contrary, estancia growth was paralleled by growth in the number of small farms (Gelman 1993c; Fradkin 1993c). In this regard, a basic unanswered research question is whether the more systematic growth of large estancias in the first half of the nineteenth century followed the eighteenth-century pattern or (according to the usual thinking) such growth occurred at the expense of the *campesino* population.

Returning to the late-colonial situation, in order to be able to explain the simultaneous increase in the number of *estancieros* and *campesinos*, it will be necessary to investigate a whole series of factors, such as land control, state policy, the development of markets, the various sectors’ opportunities for access to markets, regional characteristics, and the demographic evolution of each region. Research on these topics will make it possible to study how expanding estancias could have handled their need for labor in an environment dominated by family farming.

Land and the State

Regrettably, research advances on this subject remain modest. Major studies have been conducted on the first half of the nineteenth century that tend to qualify the impact of the large land grants made by the government of Juan Manuel de Rosas. It still seems clear, however, that the Rosas government and those preceding it favored expansion of the great *latifundios* from the 1820s and 1830s onward. Thanks to these studies, historians now have a more realistic idea of the practice of distribut-

5. The same may apply to the land around Montevideo, an area that awaits in-depth study.

ing public lands and concentrating them in private hands, which went on until the middle of the nineteenth century (Infesta 1986; Infesta and Valencia 1987; Infesta 1993). Exhaustive work has been done on Uruguay, in particular a monumental reconstruction of landownership before and after the wars of independence undertaken by Lucía Sala de Touron and her colleagues (see Sala de Touron, de la Torre, and Rodríguez 1967, 1968, 1972, 1978). These studies are problematical, however, on the subject of access to land.

The general tendency has been to associate legal ownership of land with access to land, which can actually take many different forms. If one looks at the maps showing landownership that were drawn up by Sala de Touron and her team, the impression that emerges is the near total predominance of large farms. Yet in many cases, within the large holding a multitude of small farms with various kinds of access to land were operating. Different approaches have been suggested by the few serious studies made recently of land in the colonial period and the first half of the nineteenth century (Banzato and Quinteros 1992; Canedo 1993b) and by an analysis of published sources (Pivel Devoto 1964).

During the colonial period, the supply of fertile land was fluid, especially in the most recently colonized zones. In these areas, the process of filing and establishing a land claim might have been simpler for more powerful individuals but did not exclude poorer settlers. In fact, it is difficult to find any clear preference on the part of the colonial government for consolidating landownership more readily for the large landowners to the detriment of smallholders (Pivel Devoto 1964). Rather, it seems that in those regions the government apparently lacked any clearly defined policy when it came to confirming legal ownership of land. This context permitted fairly easy access, especially in a situation where the expansion of large estancias was restricted.

To avoid confusion over terms here, we must emphasize that the idea of a fluid supply of fertile land is relative and on the Indian frontier often entailed extremely high levels of risk for settlers. Moreover, despite the existence of a market for land that was still "imperfect," the divergence in prices between, for example, the rich grain- and vegetable-growing zones near Buenos Aires and the cattle-raising zones on the Magdalena frontier (which were exposed to Indian attacks) is clear proof of differences in supply and demand for land. Such differences become even more pronounced when the Río de la Plata region as a whole is compared with nearby regions like Cuyo and Tucumán. On the pampa frontier, previously unknown aspects of Indian life on the frontier and contacts between the races there have been illuminated in studies by Raúl Mandrini (1986, 1987), Miguel Angel Palermo (1988), Jorge Bustos (1993), Carlos Mayo and Amalia Latrubesse (1993), Silvia Ratto (1994), and others.

Returning to the problem of legal ownership of land, the situation

seems to have changed after 1820, with a greater tendency toward establishing ownership, especially for large expanses of land (Banzato and Quinteros 1992). But beyond the understudied question of legal ownership, it is crucial to examine how farming operations developed even when legal ownership of the land was not possible.

A series of colonial (and postcolonial) sources has shown that poor settlers in the countryside had good opportunities to obtain parcels of land. They could rent land within the boundaries of a large holding, where the landowner placed families for various purposes: to consolidate the inner boundaries of the property, to prevent cattle from escaping, to obtain rental income, or to guarantee preferential access to the surplus seasonal labor of campesino families for operating the estancia. Campesinos could also find land in one of the numerous areas still unoccupied at the end of the colonial period.

The situation differed in the areas settled earlier, especially in those closest to urban markets and ports, where land seems to have been largely in private hands (although many landholders had only small plots). Leasing one of these parcels meant making a sizable payment (Mateo 1993c; Fradkin 1993c). Colonial land policies must have changed markedly in this respect after independence, when groups close to political authorities became explicitly interested in exploiting the new prospects opened up by the world market for livestock products.

In nineteenth-century Uruguay, however, twists and turns were frequent for small farms, and even the Portuguese government of Carlos Federico Lecor during the Portuguese occupation of the Banda Oriental (1816–1825) appears to have refrained from changing the rules of the game radically (Sala de Touron, de la Torre, and Rodríguez 1972, 1978). In Argentina, the prevailing ideology and the interests of the classes in power might seem to have been decidedly pro-estanciero, but massive incorporation of additional tracts of land into farming may have created new opportunities for poor settlers with or without access to legal ownership of land (Mateo 1993a). Moreover, a clearly pro-estancia ideology appears to have crystallized more slowly in Argentina than has been thought. Similarly, the state's total identification with a recently established social class has turned out to be less clear-cut (Halperín 1992). In this regard, the slow shaping of a new ruling class in the Río de la Plata region and its connection with the social or occupational category of "estanciero" or "hacendado" are beginning to be reevaluated (Fradkin 1993b). Studies by Halperín (1992) and Fradkin (1993b) have demonstrated that a long analytical road must be traveled to turn a statistical grouping into a "ruling class."

Inventories from the last decades of the colonial era indicate that land was the element of least value when compared with cattle, slaves, and buildings. Therefore the problem of ownership of land appears to

have been less significant than access to land use (Mayo and Fernández 1988; Garavaglia 1993c). Here population studies show that raising crops tended to be the preferred activity on campesino farms among younger heads of household. As they aged, their activities could have become more complex if they got into cattle raising. This pattern was undoubtedly related to the changing availability of family labor over the life cycle of the domestic unit, and it would also tend to corroborate the relative ease of acquiring a plot of fertile land, especially one not close to a waterway (essential for cattle raising). It was not as easy to become a cattle breeder of any importance.

As to whether a "market for land" existed or not, it is evident that many of the findings just discussed indicate a partial answer to the question. One fact is indisputable: although land prices seem to have behaved with much less short-term elasticity than did prices for cattle products (that is, they were less sensitive to economic changes), land prices varied notably according to location: proximity to the Buenos Aires or Montevideo marketplace, the Indian frontier, waterways, and "*rinconadas*."⁶ By the end of the colonial period, the land market was still in formation, that is to say, it was still an "imperfect market." During the era of independence, the effect of state offerings of land only complicated the problem (see Infesta 1986, 1993).

Markets for Agricultural Products

Historians are beginning to know much more about the functioning of the markets for agricultural products from the Río de la Plata area at the end of the colonial period, especially the market in the city of Buenos Aires. Some detailed studies on cattle and wheat markets in the city have already been made, along with a general study of prices that did not cover beef or hides but included jerky, wheat, and other agricultural products (Garavaglia 1991, 1994; Johnson 1990).

The first point to emerge is that, contrary to recent thinking, the Buenos Aires market was a large-scale consumer of bread and therefore of wheat. Two of the studies mentioned above calculated that bread consumption could have accounted for 40 to 50 percent of the total diet of the city's population (see Johnson 1990; Garavaglia 1991).⁷ At an average of two and a half *fanegas* of wheat consumed annually per Porteño (about four bushels per person), the demand was close to fifteen thousand *fanegas* in 1721 and climbed to eighty thousand near the end of the century

6. *Rinconadas* are the corners formed by waterways and other natural features of the terrain such as pools and small groves that facilitated cattle raising prior to wire fencing.

7. This percentage resulted not only from the importance of bread on the tables of Buenos Aires but also from the relatively low cost of the other crucial ingredient in the local diet—meat.

due to population growth. The market for wheat was virtually closed during the colonial period due to a series of measures that impeded importing wheat and hindered its export. Wheat or flour from other regions in the viceroyalty was sent to Buenos Aires only in years of extreme scarcity, when elevated prices could justify the high costs of overland transport.

In general, this market was supplied adequately by local production and does not seem to have experienced the crises in supply suffered in other regions in Latin America, except during lengthy periods of severe drought and disease, as happened in 1803 and 1804. This self-sufficiency was based on large-scale wheat production in the Buenos Aires countryside and along the rivers, which gave the city's port (and that of Montevideo) access to a vast hinterland at low shipping costs.

Although the amount produced by the Buenos Aires countryside usually covered what the city consumed, no wheat would have been left over for the rural population nor for the next year's planting, making it necessary to draw on a broader hinterland.⁸ And freight charges for transporting wheat along the shores of rivers were undoubtedly much lower than from some inland areas of the Buenos Aires countryside. In the Colonia region, for example, one study found that private parties were not the only ones who sought to send their surplus wheat to Buenos Aires: important residents of the city would contract to collect the Colonia wheat diezmo in order to take part in the grain market (Gelman 1993c).

The city's trade in bread grains appears to have been controlled largely by one group of individuals, which included a few major merchants (particularly those with contracts for collecting diezmos), bakers, and owners of *atahonas* (mills that used animal power). The *cabildo* (town council) tried to control the price of bread in order to avoid shortages and also fixed a price ceiling on wheat prices in lean years. But the city government lacked institutions like the *pósito* (public granary) and *alhóndiga* (grain exchange) that were normally found in Spain and other Latin American colonial cities. Such institutions would have allowed the *cabildo* to participate directly in the market by controlling a sizable share of the sales. In Buenos Aires, in contrast, wheat prices fluctuated sharply from one year to the next, following the rhythms of good and bad harvests, and price swings were further exacerbated by the speculation of some large dealers. Fluctuations also occurred throughout the year according to the agricultural cycle. These wide swings in prices suggest the problems that those growing wheat for the Buenos Aires market must

8. For example, calculations show that in the years from 1784 to 1798, the amount of wheat produced in the Buenos Aires countryside corresponded on average to what the city consumed, leaving no surplus for anyone else's needs (see Garavaglia 1991).

have experienced. These fluctuations also require analysis of the varying possibilities for success of different groups in the market when prices were rising or falling.

The market for beef in Buenos Aires by the end of the eighteenth century was one of the richest ever seen for the consumption of animal protein. Inevitably, the appearance of meat-salting plants, which processed the carcasses of large animals as did facilities supplying meat for the city, created some tensions in this market, but the abundance of beef and mutton continued to be noteworthy. Historians know little about the market for hides, but because they were basically intended for foreign trade, price fluctuations depended largely on the opportunities for exporting them.⁹ With no legal restrictions on exports (except regarding the payment of appropriate taxes), this export trade depended on the availability of ships to transport the hides and even more on peacetime conditions on the Atlantic, which were rare in that era. Scholars lack series of local prices for leather, and European records are not very useful because it is clear that when hides were expensive abroad, the situation was probably just the opposite in Buenos Aires and Montevideo, but due to the lack of shipping opportunities rather than to any decrease in their supply. In other words, it can be presumed that when shipments of hides from ports along the Río de la Plata were down, prices would also be down because the hides that could not be shipped were piling up in local warehouses. Other factors also could have contributed to fluctuations in leather prices: a prolonged drought or cattle disease, which would have reduced the supply during periods of normal trade; or the opposite, a persistently high rate of export for hides. But these factors appear to have been less pertinent in the late-colonial period than the actual possibility or lack of it for exporting hides, which depended on the cadence of the recurring wars in Europe.

Scholars now have a reasonably good idea of the ups and downs in hide exports from the port of Buenos Aires during periods of war and peace until 1796 (Moutoukias 1988). Prices appear to have adapted to these changes but were less dramatically affected than wheat prices (Gelman 1993a). One factor at work here was the relative ease of adjusting the supply of hides to market opportunities by limiting slaughter and temporarily increasing the size of the herd. Not all producers were in a position to make this kind of adjustment, however.

As for the question of cattle exports during the early years of independence, it is hard to understand why so few advances have been made since the 1852 work of Woodbine Parish (his figures served as a

9. There was also something of a local market for hides, the extent of which is impossible to measure. In both the city and the country, hides were used to meet various needs, not the least being the making of bags for storing and transporting wheat. See, for example, José Pérez Castellano's 1848 findings (1968, 1:284).

partial basis for Miron Burgin's classic work in 1946) and the 1966 article by Rodolfo Mérediz (see Parish 1852; Burgin 1960; and Mérediz 1966). Only two recent studies by Miguel Angel Rosal have supplied data that enhance understanding of internal trade in livestock products between 1831 and 1850 (Rosal 1992, 1994).

As for the relationship existing between the different types of producers and their markets during the colonial period, historians have made only two efforts to approach that question, one on the Colonia region of the Banda Oriental (Gelman 1993a) and the other on the meat provisioning of Buenos Aires (Garavaglia 1994). In Colonia large and small producers alike participated actively in the markets, although in different ways. Generally, large estancieros were able to go directly to the most important markets with their livestock products, whereas small ranchers had to content themselves with selling to local middlemen—generally shopkeepers not involved in production but often financed by large dealers in Buenos Aires or Montevideo. As for the Buenos Aires market for meat, medium- and small-scale cattle growers dominated the city's meat supply, at least until around 1810, and the supply structure probably did not change much in the following decades.

On the subject of hides, the Colonia example makes it clear that during seasonal or economic periods of poor prices for producers, the poorest ranchers had to increase their sales as much as possible in order to pay for the necessities of life and settle debts contracted during the productive cycle (there is nothing surprising about the typical "campesino" behavior of these herders). Meanwhile, large-scale cattle ranchers would try to limit slaughtering, lay off peons, and wait for prices to rise. It has also been found, however, that the horde of middlemen scouring the countryside and the absence of monopolistic control on marketing by shopkeepers or estancieros created certain spaces that limited the mercantile exploitation of campesinos and even of peons working on the estancias in the region.

The situation may have been quite different after 1820, when the state attitude may have led to increasingly direct control by a handful of individuals of the marketing of agricultural and cattle products intended for export. But this issue still needs to be studied and documented empirically.

The Estancia and the Workforce

One of the areas in which recent studies first made substantial headway was in knowledge of the great estancias. The existence of primary sources (such as account books, inventories, and overseers' corre-

spondence) for these units of production—resources lacking for small campesino plots—has made it possible to approach the subject of the large estancias with a certain degree of reliability.

What can be said today about the colonial estancias in the Río de la Plata vicinity? First, regarding the estancieros and their status in colonial society, historians have come a long way from the old image of the all-powerful estanciero dominating the Rosas era. Some studies have clearly demonstrated that most estancias were modest farms, with the few exceptions arising in Uruguay (Mayo and Fernández 1988; Mayo 1991b; Garavaglia 1993c). The colonial elite definitely must be sought elsewhere because it did not reside in the countryside. There were some large estancias belonging to a few members of the Buenos Aires elite, but analysis of their activities has revealed that their membership in the elite stemmed not from their farming and ranching activities but from running businesses and acquiring political power. In all cases, their rural activity was only one facet of the larger setting of their diversification of major activities (Socolow 1978; Fradkin 1992; Gelman 1989d; Moutoukias 1992).

The Montevideo elite seems to have been more closely tied to the fate of the Uruguayan countryside. The situation resulted from that elite's failure to compete with the Buenos Aires elite for control over the commercial arena of the viceroyalty (Sala de Touron et al. 1967; Barrán and Nahum 1963).

The second point that all the studies of estancias seem to substantiate is that the great estanciero was not a feudal lord controlling a servile rural population and mainly concerned with social prestige. Rather, the estancia was an enterprise openly oriented toward commercial gain, and its factors of production, at least in terms of the workforce, were also commercial. In contrast to what is known about some of the great haciendas of that era in Peru or New Spain or even in the northern interior of the Río de la Plata viceroyalty, the economic strategy of coastal estancias did not emphasize internal production of the maximum number of goods and services. Rather, such estancias acquired what they needed in the market (Halperín 1975; Mayo 1984; Amaral 1987; Gelman 1992b; Salvatore and Brown 1987).

As for the workforce on the estancias, quite a bit is known, and now, thanks to understanding the larger context surrounding the estancias, certain phenomena not previously understood can be explained. Most important is the finding that productive establishments, whether large or average in size, relied on a steady supply of slaves. It is now much more evident that slavery functioned as an element of stability and consistency in agrarian relations of production along the Río de la Plata (Amaral 1987; Gelman 1989a; Garavaglia 1993a, 1993b; Goldberg and Mallo 1993). But what about the hired workforce?

Efforts to substantiate the predominance of the campesino population in the colonial countryside have raised an important question about the availability of a workforce for the large estancias, given the existence of genuine alternatives for campesinos about how to make a living. An initial answer emerged from studying production cycles for cattle raising (mainly on large ranches) and wheat growing (mostly on small plots of land). These cycles appear to have been largely complementary, allowing members of campesino families whose main occupation was raising wheat to hire themselves out on cattle-raising estancias most of the year and thus supplement the family income with wages (Gelman 1989b). It has even been possible to verify empirically the seasonal movement of campesinos who became peons and vice versa (Gelman 1989b).

The question of the estancias' access to a more stable workforce remained unsolved, however, especially about workers needed to cover tasks on the estancias during wheat-harvesting months, when practically the entire rural population was busy with harvesting. The problem seems to have been resolved toward the end of the colonial period because of two factors: the importation of African slaves, and the arrival of free immigrants from other regions. Many of these men came alone. Some were single men who had no choice but to hire themselves out, at least until they could get married in the new location; others were married men who were working to bring their families to join them. Much light has been shed on this question by family and population studies. Despite the complaints of estancieros and the earlier perspective adopted by historians, late-colonial estancias do not appear to have suffered from any particular scarcity of workers. Moreover, they seem to have benefited from the presence of the campesino population in being able to hire a temporary workforce that had its own means of subsistence.

This situation may have changed drastically in the first half of the nineteenth century, when the great expansion in estancias, restrictions on the slave trade, and the huge demand for men to fight in the wars may have made the campesino population a potential workforce to be competed for rather than merely a source of seasonal help with ranch chores. Studies are also needed to determine whether a change in the technical conditions of cattle raising and the development of salting plants on a large scale might have contributed during the first half of the nineteenth century to a steadier ongoing demand for labor by estancias. Vigorous labor legislation "criminalizing" vagrancy was passed in the first decades following independence, and its provisions for compulsory submission to *conchabo* (contract labor) seem to have been aimed more at small campesinos lacking legal rights to land than at the famous gauchos (see Slatta 1980; Sabato 1985; Rodríguez Molas 1968).

Campesinos

At this juncture, we will attempt to explain what we mean by *campesino* in the Río de la Plata context.¹⁰ Defining just what this concept entails is difficult, first of all because it comprises distinct social types and even different kinds of productive activities. There were *campesinos* who farmed and *campesinos* who herded cattle and sheep. Most herders were also farmers in the limited sense of the word—that is, they grew vegetables. But not all farmers were herders. While the “pure” farmers concentrated on growing wheat, the herders produced calves and sheep for the city market, hides for export, milk, wool, and—when they had the opportunity—wheat.

What particularly distinguished these *campesino* producers from the *estancieros* was that *campesinos* relied basically on the use of family labor. That is, they did not resort to the market to meet their labor needs. In general, *campesinos* occupied more modest stretches of land than *estancieros*, although the right by which *campesinos* occupied land ranged considerably from legal ownership to various forms of leasing (when they were not engaging in the rather informal occupation of uncultivated land). These *campesinos* could produce for their own consumption or perhaps for the market, but in either case, they seem to have been acting as producers of use value because even when they participated in the market, the purpose of their sales was not (and generally could not be) accumulation but the satisfaction of family subsistence needs. It nonetheless seems to have been possible for some *campesinos* to escape the treadmill of self-sufficiency through a process of accumulation. We believe that the opportunity to accumulate did exist for at least a few of these farmers, although it was not the typical case. This subject needs to be studied in more detail, but clear examples have already been identified in San Isidro and Matanza, near the Buenos Aires grain market (Garavaglia 1993a; Contente 1993).

As noted, the Río de la Plata *campesino* family in the late-colonial period engaged in an array of activities ranging from poultry raising to growing fruit, vegetables, and grains to raising cattle and sheep. Given the relative ease of obtaining access to fertile land, setting up a *campesino* farm depended basically on the possibility of establishing a family and on the evolution of the family cycle that would create a labor force without having to resort to the market (the family-centered labor force also involved third parties—whether relatives or nonrelatives—who became

10. The word *campesino* could be replaced by *small producer* with little effect on this discussion. It seems inappropriate here to quibble over words, but our preference is for a name closer to what was actually used at the time, one that has long been a fancy way of saying “*paisano*” in Spanish.

members of the domestic group). The market conditions peculiar to this period constituted in some ways a strong incentive for the maintenance and even the development of this social model.

Sharp market fluctuations and elevated labor costs (for commercial farming and ranching operations) often placed campesino farms, which had opportunity costs near zero, in a better position than the large estancias for participating in production and marketing. In the few instances where it has been possible to study the profitability of a late-colonial estancia (Amaral 1987; Gelman 1992a), the results have shown that profits fluctuated greatly because the estancia, despite being able to lay off workers during years of low prices and reduce slaughtering and expenses, had to cover a set of fixed costs that drastically lowered its profitability. In such circumstances, campesino families who could not find alternative sources of income by selling their labor to the commercial enterprises could participate in markets with low prices. In the first place, we know that the estancias' demand for labor sought only male workers and that such demand was much smaller than the potential supply in the region—practically nil in tough economic times. This situation is much more evident in analyzing wheat production.

With the possible exception of the most fertile land located near the large consumer markets, wheat production in the rural Río de la Plata area was an extremely risky activity for enterprises with commercial expenses. Drought, disease, enormous fluctuations in yield, high labor costs, and abrupt price swings meant over the medium term that a wheat farm was "cost-effective" only when the labor force consisted of family members or could be obtained through channels outside the market (Gelman 1989b). Wheat production on small plots was additionally favored by two key factors. First, it was much easier to acquire a moderately productive piece of land for farming wheat than one for raising cattle because farming did not require access to natural rivers and streams, most of which were controlled by the large estancias. Second, the wheat-growing cycle obliged the family group to concentrate its efforts for a few months of the year (particularly during harvesting and threshing) and thus left the male head of the household and perhaps an older son free to seek other forms of employment during most of the cattle-raising cycle.

Thus campesino expansion in this context did not compete with estancia expansion but just the opposite. Estancias found a means of reducing expenses in being able to hire and lay off workers who could support themselves to a large extent by relying on their own resources. Conversely, campesinos found estancias to be an alternative for supplementing their own income with wages. The situation developed thus because estancia expansion at the end of the colonial period was still limited, and the demand for land and labor to work on estancias was therefore limited in relation to the supply. All of this may have changed

drastically after the 1820s. But the pace of these changes and the question of whether campesino expansion and stock-raising on a small scale continued are matters that remain to be studied. The little that is known from the 1854 and 1869 censuses has forced scholars to be cautious (Halperín 1985; Mateo 1993c).

Population, Families, and Relations of Production

Population studies on the Río de la Plata region have proved to be one of the keys to reinterpreting the area's agricultural history. These studies have enabled researchers to confirm the nature and dynamics of campesino family life, migration processes, and the characteristics of estancias and their possibilities for obtaining a workforce. The use of censuses and parish records has made possible here and elsewhere in Latin America an extensive updating of historians' vision of the past.

First, studies of the Río de la Plata population of the period have contradicted the standard image of the prevalence of gauchos, those unattached males who wandered from place to place, seemingly having been born by God knows what artificial procedure (see Moreno 1989, 1993; André, Blanco, del Hoyo, and Van Vliet 1991; Garavaglia 1993a, 1993b; Gelman 1992c; Canedo 1993a; Mateo 1991, 1993c; García Belsunce 1992; Contente 1993). These studies have shown instead that families accounted for most of the population. Although this fact seems disarmingly evident in the specialized literature on Latin America, it was not so obvious in the local historiography on the Río de la Plata.

The population was a young one (about half the inhabitants were younger than twenty), made up mostly of small nuclear families, as was common where land was readily available. Access to land seems to have allowed early independence for couples, who could set themselves up as separate families as soon as they occupied a parcel. But the prevalence of nuclear families should not obscure the phenomenon of "horizontalty": the primary sources (especially name censuses) have allowed the study of surnames and led to the conclusion that "networks of nuclear families" lived near each other. This horizontality, along with ties among compatriots resulting from patterns of migration, reinforced campesino solidarity.

On Buenos Aires, comparing population with units of production has verified that the number of individuals appearing in the 1744 population list as "peons and contract laborers," or workers living on wages (a category that probably included individuals who combined temporary work as peons with independent production activity) represented only a tiny fraction of the workforce (each production unit averaged only .75 "peons and conchabados"). Most of the work was carried out by family labor. In the Buenos Aires countryside and in Uruguay, this situation continued throughout the colonial period. Although a considerable increase in the slave sector

has been noted, slaves were concentrated in the large and medium-sized production units, while most producers were still relying on family labor (as demonstrated by the 1813 and 1815 censuses). What is remarkable is that in Buenos Aires as late as 1854, the proportion of “independent producers” to the dependent workforce remained similar to that of 1815, even though slaves had disappeared by then and employers had to “resign themselves” to hiring unruly peons. The disintegration of slave relations of production was a complex process that advanced and regressed. One recent study demonstrated the importance of the thousands of “freed slaves” who had been seized by pirate privateers during the war between the Provinces of the Río de la Plata and the Brazilian Empire (1825–1828) (Crespi 1994).

Other findings of great interest have emerged from the first serious study of birth and death rates in the countryside in the first half of the nineteenth century, a study based on parish archives (Mateo 1993b). Here historians have found a population whose basic behavior was much like that in other large areas of classic frontiers in new territory. This finding can lead to reopening the discussion about the nature of the Río de la Plata frontier in the nineteenth century and to moving scholars away from the old image of an expanse occupied almost exclusively by cattle and not by men and women. Indeed, if historians consult a classic study of the frontier published in 1968 and compare it with our present-day knowledge of the subject, the long road traveled in the new direction will be evident.¹¹

These population studies have shed light on the question of where the estancias were able to obtain the regular workforce that campesino families did not provide. Two sectors of the population fulfilled this function: slaves, whose numbers increased toward the end of the colonial period but decreased steadily after the war for independence and the civil wars; and migrants, who often arrived alone or as single men who had not yet been able to obtain a piece of land. All the population pyramids show clearly the equal division in numbers between the sexes among children but a marked increase in males of working age, a cohort consisting largely of internal migrants and slaves.

More is also known today about where these free migrants came from and the reasons for this movement of population in the sending and receiving communities. Studies have been made thus far on San Luis, Córdoba, and Santiago del Estero (Garavaglia and Wentzel 1989; Romano 1989; Farberman 1993; and Mateo 1993a). Thus phenomena are beginning to emerge that were not analyzed previously regarding the internal migrants of the

11. According to Roberto Cortés Conde, “Argentina did not experience a large-scale movement of population pushing the frontier farther inland. . . . When definitive occupation of the new territories took place, there was little movement of population toward the new areas, which were rapidly occupied instead by herds of cattle being moved to the new lands in search of new and better pastures” (Cortés Conde 1968, 4). This view reflected what was known at the time about this issue.

period, such as migratory chains, family structure in areas of origin, and matrimonial preferences. Seasonal and permanent migrants also explain the significant increase in the Río de la Plata population, which was partly natural (particularly given the early age at which women married) but also resulted from the continuous incorporation of persons arriving from outside the region. These phenomena are keys to understanding the economic growth of the rural Río de la Plata region at the end of the colonial period and the first half of the nineteenth century and the acceptable level of harmony existing between estancieros and campesinos, especially in the earlier period.¹²

This "harmony" between estancieros and campesinos was only relative and must have changed significantly following independence.¹³ A pioneering study by Pilar González has revealed some of the social tensions reverberating in the countryside right before the beginnings of Rosismo (González Bernaldo 1987). Studies by Ricardo Salvatore (1991a, 1992, 1993) and Carlos Cansanello (1993, 1994) have focused on the difficulties faced by the dominant groups in their efforts to tighten control over the workforce during the years after the colony broke away from Spain.

Technology and Ecosystems

Scholars have also made considerable progress in the difficult terrain of the history of ecosystems and agricultural technology. An initial study has been published on the subject that we hope will open the topic to discussion (Garavaglia 1989). Except for some sweeping overviews like the works of Noel Sbarra and an excellent discussion by engineer Alfredo Montoya, this topic seems to have been neglected since the old studies that were made at the end of the nineteenth century, which were not "historical" in intent but eminently practical. Study of this aspect is clearly central to a better understanding of Río de la Plata rural life.

As mentioned, one question that must be studied is the extent to which the increase in producing salted meat in the early nineteenth century changed the technical conditions for livestock production, which in turn altered the balance of the entire system. In like manner, introduction

12. In addition, these first approaches to the subject of internal migration during the colonial era and between 1810 and 1850 are important for improved understanding of developments in relations of production in the migrants' areas of origin. Without the "escape hatch" that migration to the littoral region constituted, the colonial and postcolonial history of Tucumán, Cuyo, and the lowlands of the plains of Santiago de Estero in the Chaco would have been completely different. Moreover, it is worth noting that migration went on a long time in the Río de la Plata area, dragging along into our own era.

13. The works of Lucía Sala de Touron et al. on the Uruguayan colonial era reveal numerous examples of conflicts between estancieros and poor rural dwellers. Also, the published and unpublished works of Pedro Andrés García (1758–1833) indicate the increasingly strained situation in the Buenos Aires countryside during the early postrevolutionary period (see, for example, García 1969).

of the *balde volcador* (dump bucket) may have made it feasible to use some of the *cabeceras* (outlying areas) that were disdained earlier by *estancieros*.¹⁴ Little progress has been made on this question since the older study by Noel Sbarra (1961). For example, we already know that at the end of the colonial period, wells equipped with traditional buckets were in common use in long-colonized rural areas (Garavaglia 1993d). But nothing specific is known about the spread of the *balde volcador* after 1825.¹⁵ Another change that occurred a bit later, the introduction and spread of *Eucalyptus globulus* in the humid pampa areas, also calls for detailed study, as does the spread of wire fencing.

Regional Differences

Significant differences in the various agricultural regions of the Río de la Plata area have been mentioned. This point is worth stressing because historians have become aware of regional heterogeneity from reading the recent literature.

Although diversity in production seems to have been common throughout the region during the eighteenth century and at the beginning of the nineteenth, greater emphasis on one activity or another can be found in different periods due to several factors: proximity to major consumer markets, the ecological characteristics of each area, and the settlement's comparative age. Considerable difference was found between the eastern and western shores of the Río de la Plata, with the eastern side devoted more to raising stock for hides. The western side exhibited internal differences: a strip close to Buenos Aires devoted to supplying grain and produce for the city market; a southern rural area engaged more in breeding cattle to supply the urban market for meat; and a northern rural area that produced mules and cattle on a large scale. The near west was probably an intermediate "mixed" area of "estancieros" and *campesino* farmers and herders.

The types of farms and ranches included the large *estancias* in the Banda Oriental (those with more than ten thousand head of cattle), on a scale rarely seen in the western region during the colonial period. Other distinct developments were the large *chacras* surrounding Buenos Aires and Montevideo. From the little that is known so far, it would appear that in the new frontier regions of the Banda Oriental at the end of the eighteenth century (to the north of the Río Negro), a situation evolved like the one that presumably predominated in the nineteenth century: more cows,

14. "*Cabecera*" (the head area) was paradoxically the portion of the *estancia* farthest from rivers and streams and the place where occupation by *campesino* families with precarious title to the land was generally tolerated.

15. The traditional well with a bucket required at least two people working together to fill the "*jagüeles*" (water basins). A "dump bucket" made it possible for one person with a horse (usually a child) to carry out the task—and in less time.

a small, mostly male population, and the predominance of large estates. But the larger part of the territory inhabited at the beginning of the nineteenth century, where most population and production were concentrated, was mainly taken up with campesino farms.

Following independence, the situations of the Banda Oriental and the province of Buenos Aires appear to have almost reversed. The Banda Oriental experienced a remarkable expansion in the frontier during the colonial period, while Buenos Aires was confined to a narrow strip of territory. But after 1810, large-scale incorporation of territory into the western strip of the Río de la Plata became more and more common, while the Uruguay frontier was narrowing. This trend must be kept in mind in interpreting the agrarian violence that marked Uruguay's early days as an independent country, as compared with the relative state of peace in Buenos Aires, even though work by Pilar González Bernaldo has shown that not everything under Rosas came up roses (see González Bernaldo 1987).

Remaining Unresolved Problems for Future Research

The new findings described here on the rural history of the colonial Río de la Plata show that much has been learned recently. It is nonetheless easy to see that much remains unknown. First, more studies on estancias, especially the privately owned "*estancias laicas*," are needed to allow historians to put in perspective their detailed knowledge on a handful of such estancias. The need is especially pressing for the decades following the expansion in estancias in the 1820s. Above all, scholars should endeavor to meet the challenge of making similar studies of the large grain-, fruit-, and vegetable-growing chacras around Buenos Aires and Montevideo and of small campesino farms (a greater challenge because they left few written traces). Special priority should also be given to the question of methods of leasing, despite the scarcity of written documentation for the earlier periods. Several overviews of the topic have been published (Fradkin 1992, 1993c; Birocco 1992). The few examples available from the independence era reveal fairly complex leasing contracts loosely resembling some types of *mezzadria* (sharecropping) found in south central Italy. The views of some Italian authors on the relationship between "rent" and accumulation could be of great heuristic importance in the future (Giorgetti 1974, 1977).

Despite the apparent silence of the documents, indirect ways can be found to make such studies and compensate for the gaps. Analysis of certain kinds of administrative and accounting sources (population censuses, diezmos collected directly, and alcabalas that make it possible to measure the sales of different kinds of producers) show at least the relative importance of various kinds of agricultural operations in the Río de

la Plata countryside, and how they fitted in with the large-scale rural operations. After independence, many of these sources (which had been scorned by some historians) disappeared, and those that are turning up are not always of the quality required.

Moreover, to advance understanding of the rationality and development of various agrarian activities, historians urgently need a detailed study of agricultural prices covering many decades, one that would compare the colonial period with at least the first three decades of independence. A reliable series of prices for the period 1800–1840 is crucial to understanding subsequent developments in the rural economy and political life of the Río de la Plata.

As far as technology and ecosystems are concerned, we still have much to learn. Reanalyzing the question of grain-growing profits and coming up with new empirical data seem essential for an improved understanding of the established theoretical positions on rent differential (Laclau 1969; Flichman 1977) and the role in the world market played by grain production in the Argentine pampa since the end of the nineteenth century. Similarly, a study of the changes in the kinds of grains grown (wheat in particular) is badly needed for advancing along these lines. Climatology also deserves special attention, given its continuing importance in the development and the ups and downs of the pampa rural economy. The historical studies of climate by María del Rosario Prieto offer a good example of how this kind of analysis can be properly carried out, even though they touch only peripherally on this region.¹⁶

A regional focus seems almost obligatory today to avoid inaccurate generalizations about the rural Río de la Plata, which now appears less ordinary and monotonous than previously imagined. To this end, systematic studies are needed of much of the Banda Oriental and the provinces north of Buenos Aires, areas that have been badly neglected in the literature. The agrarian history of Santa Fé, Entre Ríos, and Corrientes remains “unfinished business,” except for analysis of the diezmos in Corrientes (Maeder 1977) and J. C. Chiaramonte’s studies on that area, which focus only partially on agrarian life (Chiaramonte 1991). This lacuna is even more serious when one recalls that many of the livestock products exported from Buenos Aires during the first half of the nineteenth century originated in those regions, as has been established in detailed studies of the flow of trade from the littoral region to the port city (Wentzel 1988; Schmidt 1991, 1992; Rosal 1992, 1994). Research by Griselda Tarragó on the Diez de Antino family of Santa Fé represents a first step toward more accurate knowledge of rural matters in this region (Tarragó 1994).

Finally, it is essential that all such research projects face the chal-

16. See Prieto (1980, 1983) and Prieto and Herrera (1992). On this question, see also Rabassa et al. (1987) and Ardissonne (1937).

lence of thinking about the continuities and the tremendous changes that transpired after the revolution and led to the building of a society that differed considerably from colonial society, especially in the rural sphere. Our survey has made it apparent that recent research efforts have focused primarily on the late-colonial period and that new studies on the first half of the nineteenth century are only beginning to appear. The time has come to undertake similar efforts for the crucial postcolonial years, now that we can build on a more solid understanding of the previous period.

Gaps remain, along with many unanswered questions. But comparison of the historiographic inventory presented here with one published only five years ago (Garavaglia 1990) reveals the long distance we have come since then and how much the last ten years have changed our image of the colonial rural world of the Río de la Plata and the early years of independence.

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