

## JUAN IÑIGO CARRERA

*Wandering Paysanos: State Order and Subaltern Experience in Buenos Aires during the Rosas Era*, by Ricardo Salvatore. Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2003. Pp. xiv+524. US\$59.95 (hb). ISBN 0-8223-3086-5

There is a noticeable tendency in studies of the historical development of Argentine society to present the struggles between workers and employers as if they had started to acquire their own identity only by the turn of the nineteenth century. Even authors that criticize capitalist social forms share that viewpoint. The image that class antagonism involving the working class as a subject itself arose only with European immigration and once the so-called 'process of national organization' was completed thirty years after Rosas's fall, has played a significant role in the discussions about political relations and actions throughout Argentine history. The ideologists of capitalists and landowners have always resorted to this image to create the illusion of social harmony between workers and exploiters, only broken by the introduction of what they call 'subversive foreign ideas'.

According to the prevailing image, from the consolidation of national independence to 1880, meaningful social antagonism within capitalist social relations was limited to internal conflicts among the dominant classes: landowners and capitalists of inland provinces against those of Buenos Aires province; the rural bourgeoisie of Buenos Aires province against the commercial bourgeoisie of Buenos Aires port; the latter against the merchants of upriver ports; the armed representatives of British and French capitals resorting to blockade in the name of free trade. The workers, mostly rural (*paysanos*), are barely allowed into that history. They appear as having no part in social antagonism other than following their respective bosses, whether *Federales* or *Unitarios*, into civil wars with each other and against the aborigines.

Salvatore's book casts light on this apparent monotonous panorama of subordination, thus allowing strong contrasts to emerge from it. The world of workers appears to be full of tints, of antagonistic relations with their employers and the state, of ways of acting in economic and political struggle, i.e. in the production and exertion of their consciousness.

Salvatore bases his point of view on a meticulous analysis of a variety of issues through which antagonistic relations between wage labourers and commodity producers, on the one side, and landowners and capitalists, on the other, took shape. Furthermore, Salvatore's analysis penetrates through the antagonistic relations between wage labourers and commodity producers and the state, and by following this path it lays open the antagonistic relations between landowners and capitalists and their own state apparatus. Thus, the book presents the reader with market practices, cash nexus and conflict, the *provinciano's* path to work, class by appearance, the power of laws, the making of crime, the experience of punishment, negotiation and protest within regiments, deserters' reasons, memories of war, rituals of federalism and the relation of subalterns with progress.

The author digs into an unusual amount of first-hand testimonies, mostly produced by state authorities, as judicial reports and recruits' files, but also people's petitions, literary and historical reconstructions and private documents. The book also reproduces some contemporary paintings that Salvatore deconstructs to lay bare their ideological meaning.

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Salvatore's theoretical approach follows that of the Indian subaltern studies group, encompassing the critical inclusion of elements from Gramsci, the British Marxist historians, Foucault and Derrida. Undoubtedly, his book belongs in this theoretical tradition. Its richness in this sense makes the reader's interest go beyond the particularities of the Argentine case, to recognize in it a paradigmatic exposition of the scope inherent in that methodological approach. Certainly, the book owes its strength and originality to this approach. However, Salvatore follows it to the point of making evident its inherent weakness as a means of uncovering the social determinations at stake and, moreover, of making evident how it backfires as a critique of capitalist social relations.

Salvatore's central thesis is that wandering was the general strategy chosen by *paysanos* in pursuit of their personal interest, as they were caught in the middle of a struggle between Rosas's authoritarian state's need for soldiers and the rural capitalists' need for workers, under circumstances of insufficient availability of men (the study is explicitly limited to the rural male population). Now, when a slave works harder to avoid the whip of his master falling on his back, could it be said that he has chosen a strategy in pursuit of his personal interests? Of course, one could say that slaves were not free individuals, while *paysanos* were.

Salvatore remarks that *paysanos* were free individuals, in opposition to other views that present relations of personal subordination to their employers as a specific character of their wage labour. In so doing, he exposes the limits of his methodological approach. His main sources are located at the points of social intercourse where that sort of personal subordination has been broken: police reports on migrants, seasonal workers, fugitives of the law, etc. The consequent absence of any manifestation of paternalistic relationships in these biased sources is taken by Salvatore as a proof of the absence of paternalistic relationships. Nevertheless, he himself makes these relations evident as he quotes letters and petitions that openly appealed to Rosas's paternalistic intervention. But Salvatore only sees in them a proof of the capacity of *paysanos* to bargain freely even with the highest authority of the state.

Let us leave aside the fact that personal subordination has been a concrete determination of wage labour in primitive stages of capitalist development. Let us follow Salvatore as he takes *paysanos* freely selling their labour power in pursuit of their personal interest at face value. As Marx shows (*Capital I*, chapter 23), such is precisely the appearance presented in circulation by the determination of wage labourers as forced labourers for total social capital. Free will is the concrete form of alienated will. Under capitalism, the self-interest of the labourer is but the need of total social capital to reproduce labour power with the material and moral attributes that accumulation demands from it. The real subsumption of labour to capital means that the latter revolutionizes the materiality of labour in search of relative surplus value, thus determining the productive subjectivity of the labourer in a historically specific way (*Capital I*, chapter 16).

Salvatore states that his analysis resorts to the notion of real subsumption. Nevertheless, he reduces this notion to an abstract 'realm of the imposition of work' (p. 61). Thus, real subsumption is inverted into the free will of the capitalist attempting to exert coercion on the free will of the labourer, and the free will of the labourer resisting that attempt. Every determination of the labourer's consciousness by the form in which his labour and his individual consumption is socially organized, is inverted into an external relation of learning and development of strategies in which his consciousness as a free individual asserts itself when faced with any attempt at coercion. What belongs in the realm of the productive consumption of labour power is reduced to the appearances of circulation. Social being appears as emerging from consciousness.

The author provides an extremely crude example of how far such an inversion can take. He presents the case of soldiers undergoing desperate conditions, due to several months' delay in collecting their wages, who request authorization from their commanders to seek temporary employment as peons in nearby *estancias*. This clear proof of the brutal exploitation of the *paysanos* both as soldiers for the capitalist state, and as a source of cheap labour power for private capitalists, is inverted by Salvatore into a proof of the power enjoyed by the *paysanos* to bargain over their living conditions. What started as a critique of capitalist exploitation dangerously turns into the apologetics of the labourer's freedom under capitalism.

As mentioned above, Salvatore highlights the competition between cattle-breeding capitalists and the state for *paysanos* as labour power and soldiers. However, he overlooks the fact that civil war and conquest war against natives were concrete forms taken by the emerging national process of capital accumulation centred in the very same cattle-breeding capitalists and landowners. The above-mentioned competition did not go beyond that inherent in the general relationship between the political representative of total social capital, i.e. the state, and individual capitalists. Actually Rosas and his partners were the strongest capitalists in cattle breeding and the hides and meat-salting industry of their time. Nevertheless, Salvatore gives no reason for Rosas's political and military actions other than his authoritarian project. His fall is explained by the success of another project willing to develop a more liberal, progressive and democratic society. Again, consciousness appears as determining social being.

Salvatore's viewpoint cannot account for social change other than by presenting it as if it were simply rooted in somebody's strategy. The resulting limitations become particularly visible in the weaker discussion of his closing chapter on subalterns and progress, which is devoted to the changes in *paysanos'* ways in the aftermath of Rosas's fall. As the figure of wandering *paysanos* disappeared from official records, Salvatore directly argues that they changed strategy into one of invisibility.

Salvatore's book constitutes a thought-provoking work, both in the strong points of its original research and for its shortcomings. In brief, this is a very stimulating and original book that deserves to be read and subjected to thorough discussion.

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*Medicine Murder in Colonial Lesotho: The Anatomy of a Moral Crisis*, by Colin Murray and Peter Sanders. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press for the International African Institute, 2005. Pp. xviii+492. £50 (hb). ISBN 0-7486-2285-5

At the end of the 1940s, one of the few stories about tropical Africa circulated to grab the attention of Western newspaper readers was the apparent upsurge in medicine murders in Basutoland Protectorate, the present-day kingdom of Lesotho. Pregnant with colour and lurid notoriety, the story was taken up by a number of novelists as well as the American travel writer John Gunther. There is no clear happy end to this story but it did gradually become yesterday's news and faded from the back pages into oblivion. A still common feature of southern African life has largely remained in obscurity.

In Africanist scholarship, too, medicine murders are very rarely a subject of discussion, unlike witchcraft and other forms of supernatural killing. It is most debatable whether

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