

Gaicho and Tango -The Argentine Sentiment of Failure in the Construction of Identity

OSHIMA Hitoshi
Fukuoka University, Japan

I

First of all, I would like to express my thanks to my colleague, Dr. Shigemi Inaga, for giving me the chance to participate in this Symposium. For me it is a great pleasure to talk about my extraordinary experience in Argentina, one of two South-American countries in which I have spent a couple of years.

I lived in Argentina, more specifically in Buenos Aires, from 1987 to 1990. I also lived in Lima, Peru from 1983 to 1985, but because Prof. Kato will talk about Peru, which gave me another extraordinary experience, I would rather talk about Argentina, especially of Buenos Aires, one of the strangest cities that I have ever known.

Among South American countries, Argentina has a characteristic that distinguishes it from the rest. It differs from the others because it is the only "white" country in Latin America except for Uruguay. I mean that it is a country where most people are of European origin, and that natives, wrongly called *Indios*, are relatively few. From the ethnic point of view, Argentina resembles Canada, Australia or New Zealand, though it is completely different from them from the cultural point of view.

Appreciable differences between Anglo-American countries and Argentina are as follows: 1.) there are many more *mestizos*(mixed or half-blooded people) in Argentina than in Anglo-America, and 2.) Argentina, like other Latin American countries, has no special areas, or reservations, for the *Indios*, while North American countries have many for their native Indians. These differences derive from the fact that Latin Europeans who conquered and colonized Central and South America, from Mexico down to Patagonia, had a tendency to live together with the natives, and even to have children with them, while Germanic or Anglo-Saxons who settled down in North America have had another mentality; they preferred living separately from other races.

Despite these differences from Anglo-American countries, Argentina is still different from the rest of the Latin American countries. It has fewer natives than neighboring countries such as Bolivia, Paraguay, Brazil or Chili, and this particular difference comes from a series of massacres of natives by the colonists during the latter

half of the 19th century. The '*Indios de Paraguay*,' the natives of the northern Argentina, were mostly killed in 1865, and those of Patagonia, the southern part of the country, were massively killed around 1880. Thus Argentina has become a "white" country, and the fact that its economic success around the end of the 19th century or the beginning of the 20th attracted many Europeans to emigrate from across the Atlantic, made Argentina more and more "white".

You may know that Argentina was one of the richest countries in the world during the first twenty years of the 20th century. If you visit Buenos Aires, the capital, you will see many splendid old buildings and glamorous streets that are reminiscent of the glorious past of the country. Its economy, based on extraordinary export of beef was dealt a severe blow by the Depression of 1929; since then, it has never recovered its economic power, nor has the country enjoyed real political stability. The easiest way in Argentine politics to stabilize the country has been to resort to military dictatorship. And that has become the unfortunate tradition of the country. Doubtlessly, this political characteristic relates to Argentine cultural particularity.

II

There are two different cultures in Argentina: the culture of the provinces called *la cultura del interior* or '*de los gauchos*,' and that of Buenos Aires called *la cultura porteña*. The former culture is cultivated mainly by the *pampa* cowboys called *los gauchos*, and the latter by new comers, mainly from Europe, called *los porteños*. The name *porteño* means the one who lives around the port, consequently one who is not really settled down.

With regard to these two cultures, let me anticipate my conclusion. In my opinion, the two sides are very different on the surface, but one and the same at their root. They are one and the same because both are cultures whose members suffer from uncertainty about their cultural identity. The *gaucho* culture of the provinces is deprived of the memory of the ancestral native culture, and the other, the *porteño* culture of Buenos Aires, is deprived of its ancestral European culture.

One has only to read '*Martín Fierro*,' an epic poem written by Jose Hernández (1834-1886), from 1872 to 1879, to get an idea of *gaucho* culture. Through the sad story of a *gaucho* cowboy whose name is Martín Fierro, who suffers from injustice done to him by the proprietors of huge estates, the author not only describes the inhuman conditions of this *gaucho*, the bastard child of a white man and a native woman, but he also portrays Fierro's independent spirit as well as his outdoor life which is so intimately connected to the *pampa*, the purest form of prairie, and the ideal natural

environment.

This literary work of the past century has been considered to be the most representative of the Argentine national literature because it expresses, in a very poetical way, the people's love for both the *pampa* and for freedom. But I think there is a deeper and unconscious reason for the popularity of this work. I dare say that Martín Fierro represents the voice of those Argentines who feel they to be somehow like the *gaucho* hero, that is, to know the feeling of loneliness and disconnection with his past. Argentine people must feel somehow that they are akin to cultural bastards, suspended between the old world of Europe and the New World.

I said that Martín Fierro, the *gaucho* hero, was the bastard child of a white man and a native woman. Indeed, he has neither his ancestral native culture nor his European one. Sadness and uncertainty inevitably accompany him, and that feeling of lack of self-identification is repeatedly expressed in other Argentine poetry and novels.

Some of the most famous examples of such literature are the folk songs written and sung by Atahualpa Yupanqui (Hector Chabero 1908-1991), a folk-singer and writer, who not only laments his lost native culture, but who also intends to recover it and transmit it to coming generations. Here is one of his beautiful songs based on the regional legend of Tucumán, the northwest region of Argentina. I will give it first in the original Spanish language version, followed by my poor translation of it. The title is '*La luna Tucumana*' ('*The Moon of Tucumán*'):

*Yo no le canto a la luna porque alumbra y nada más.
 Le canto porque sabe de mi largo caminar.
 ¡Ay, luna tucumana, tamborcito calchaquí!
 Compañera de los gauchos en las sendas de Tafi.
 Perdido en las cerrazones, ¿quién sabe, vidita, por dónde andaré?
 Mas cuando salga la luna, cantaré, cantaré;
 A Tucumán querido, cantaré, cantaré..
 Con esperanza o con pena en los campos de Acherál,
 Yo he visto a la luna buena besando el cañaverál.
 En algo parecemos, luna de la soledad,
 Yo voy andando y cantando, que es mi modo de alumbrar.*

"If I sing a song for the Moon, it is not only because She just glows,
 I sing for Her because She knows of my long, long walks.
 Oh, the Moon of Tucuman! (you are) the Calchaquis' drum
 (You are) the Gauchos' companion when they're on Tafi paths.

Who knows, my life, where I will go, I who am lost in a deep fog?
But when She comes out, I will sing, oh yes, I will.
For my dear Tucuman, I will sing, oh yes, I will.
Walking through the field of Acheral, with pain or with hope,
I saw her, the Full Moon, kissing the cane field.
Oh, the Moon of Loneliness! In something, we resemble each other.
I am always walking and singing, and that's my way of glowing."

It is not difficult to appreciate here the loneliness of the *gaucho*, for the song writer associates himself with the moon of Tucumán when he says "luna de la soledad" (the Moon of Loneliness). The *gaucho's* nostalgia for a lost culture is evident he sings "¡Ay, luna tucumana, tamborcito calchaquí!" ("Oh, the Moon of Tucuman! you are the Calchaquis' drum.") *Calchaquí* is the name of a native tribe who once lived in northeast Argentina. The expression: "Yo he visto a la luna buena besando el cañaveral" ("I saw the Full Moon kissing the cane field") shows clearly the attachment to, and poetical kinship with the natural environment maintained by *gaucho* culture.

III

Now let me turn to the other Argentine culture I have mentioned, that of the *Porteños*. Nothing represents it better than tango songs. Those who do not know much about tango might imagine it to be quite a refined type of music, but in reality, it is sentimental and sometimes vulgar. Through the tango, the *Porteños* express their everyday joy and sadness; what is striking to us who are not Argentine, is that they make a particular point of narrating their constant disappointments over by the inconsistency of their socio-economic as well as emotional lives.

Many tango songs are indeed love songs, but in them, there is a bit of bitterness, and the bitterness comes from being cheated or betrayed in love. There is a general sentiment of distrust and incredulity, and such sentiments sometimes go so far as to become a harsh criticism of *Porteño* society itself.

'Criticism' may be too analytical a word for such songs. I had better use the word 'scorn.' Whenever a critical spirit appears, it is not constructive, but destructive.

'*Cambalache*' (*The Pawnshop*), composed by Enrique Santos Discépolo (1901-1951), in 1931, is one of the best examples of such songs. The song reflects not only the atmosphere of the time just after the Great Depression, but also the typical *Porteño* mentality of which I have been talking.

Here is the original Spanish language version of the song, followed by my English translation, an unsatisfactory one because of my lack of ability and of knowledge of the *Porteño* slang of the early 1930s. A *Porteña* friend of mine, Paula Pasnansky, who kindly sent me a glossary of tango slang, explained some terms to me.

El mundo fue y será una porquería, ya lo sé. En el 510 y en el 2000 también, que siempre ha habido chorros, maquiavelos y estafados, contentos y amargados, varones y dublé.

Pero el siglo XX es un despliegue de maldad insolente, ya no hay quién lo niegue. Vivimos revolcados en un merengue y en el mismo lodo todos manoseados.

Hoy resulta que es lo mismo ser derecho que traidor, ignorante, sabio, chorro, pretensioso, estafador. Todo es igual, nada es mejor, lo mismo un burro que un gran profesor. No hay aplazados, ¡qué va a haber!, ni escalafón. Los inmorales nos han igualado.

Si uno vive en la impostura, y otro roba en su ambición; da lo mismo que sea cura, colchonero; da igual, caradura o polizon.

¡Qué falta de respeto! que atropello a la razón! Cualquiera es un señor, cualquiera es un ladrón, mezclado con Toscanini, va Don Chicho y Napoleón, Don Bosco y la Mignon, Carnera y San Martín.

Igual que la vidriera irrespetuosa de los cambalaches, se ha mezclado la vida herida de un sable sin remache, ves como llora la Biblia junto a un calefón.

Siglo XX, cambalache, problemático y febril. El que no llora no mama y el que no afana es un Gil. Dale no más. Dale que va.

Que allá en el horno se va uno a encontrar. No pienses más, sentáte a un lado.

Ya a nadie importa si naciste honrado, si es lo mismo el que labura noche y día como un buey, el que vive de las minas, que el que mata, que el que cura o está fuera de la ley.

"The world has been and will always be bullshit. I know that.

The year 510 or 2000, nothing has changed;

I know there have always been thieves, Machiavellians, happy ones and unhappy ones, men and gays.

But the 20th century has seen the development of tremendous evil,

That nobody would deny any more. We are all living

In a mess, all mixed up, all soiled with the same mud.

Today there is no difference between being correct and being a traitor
 No more between a learned man and an ignorant one;
 One cannot tell a thief from a pretender or a swindler.
 Everything is the same; nothing is better than anything else.
 Being the grand professor is no better than being a donkey.
 No more failure, oh of course not, and no more promotion, either.
 Immoral people now claim equality. One man lives dishonestly,
 While another steals to satisfy his ambition.
 It is the same to be a priest or a bed-maker, to be virgin or a freeloader.
 What a lack of respect! What violence to Reason!
 Anybody is a Lord, anybody is a thief, who cares whether you're a cross between
 Toscanini,
 Don Chicho and Napoleon, Don Bosco and La Mignon, Carnera and San Martin.
 Life thus run through by a perfectly pierced sword,
 is no different from the a sordid pane of glass in a pawnshop window.
 See how the Bible weeps when it reaches the inferno.
 Pawnshop that is the 20th century, problematic and fevered;
 He who does not cry gets no sustenance;
 Just as he who does not steal is a mere idiot.
 But don't worry, take it easy!
 It's all the same; we're all going into the hot ovens of hell.
 Don't think twice, stay as you are.
 It doesn't matter to anybody at all that you were born honest,
 If it is all the same to work on the farm day and night like an ox
 or to earn one's living on the girls;
 killing people is no different from curing them, for everything is out of law."

The song is tremendously pessimistic. Can you hear it? The destructiveness it expresses is too evident, and yet the song sounds ironically joyful to the ear.

The *cambalache* (pawnshop) of the title refers to a world that has become a pawnshop because everything has lost its value, and where the most worthless things jostle with the most valuable, as though in a pawnshop. The tango poet declares, without any hesitation, that the world is mere rubbish, full of swindlers and thieves, and persuades us that the 20th century has seen evil that no other century had ever known. Despite such a dark vision of the time, there is a sort of vigorousness in the song, a strength to live on even though the world seems such a mess.

The most striking aspect of the song is that it tries to persuade you that given such miserable conditions, one had better be one of the swindlers or thieves because there are no more rules or laws to protect and supervise. Such nihilistic and desperate emotions seem to be at the core of the *Porteños* identity that, unable to trust anybody, try to survive their chaotic situation at any cost.

The poet says: 'why should we be honest if nobody pays attention to honesty?' Such corruption of the spirit cannot be explained only in terms of economic crisis. A cultural context in which a remarkable lack of cultural identity, or a sense of belonging to a culture, is the real reason behind the sentiment of tango songs.

IV

Argentina is a huge country and Buenos Aires, the capital, is also huge. It has many wide streets where everything is situated in a large space, quite distant from one another. Those who come from a super densely populated city such as Tokyo, may experience the city with a feeling of emptiness.

This feeling of emptiness, subjective as it may be, relates to the *Porteno's* cultural state. Their lack of cultural identity seems to intensify our sensation of emptiness.

As a matter of fact, *porteños* often express their self-disdain with a certain pride, which is a paradoxical attitude. They say, for example, that Mexicans are descended from Aztecs, that Peruvians derive from the Incas, but that they themselves are, quite literally, just descended from a boat. They are conscious of their unsettled mind; they have made of it a sort of identity, even though they do not truly believe it.

The uncertainty or unsettledness of their mental state is reflected in the fictitious character of the city of Buenos Aires itself. The financial area near the port is called "the City" as in London; the widest avenue called *9 de Julio* (*The ninth of July*) resembles Les Champs-Élysées in Paris, and at the center of the avenue, stands a stone tower called an '*obelisque*' just as is done in Paris. The whole city is built up in a way that makes it easy for us to the *Porteños'* desire for Europe. They prefer to think, not of their ancestral countries of Spain or Italy, but of Northern Europe which seems more civilized, more chic. Indeed, Buenos Aires is a fictional city; it is a product of the *Porteños'* fantasy, based on their feelings of failure in constructing an identity.

This does not mean, of course, that every citizen of the city has completely lost any trace of his ancestral culture. For example, we can find Latin cultures in their gastronomical life; we also find Italian expressions in their Spanish. (I am told there have been more Italian immigrants than Spanish.) But their memory of their

grandparents' culture is quite fragmentary, and each piece of their memory is disconnected from the next, so that they have little possibility of making a coherent picture. As there is no social cohesion in the country, there is no cultural unity, either on the individual or social level.

Argentine culture being so fragmentary, we can ask ourselves how the Argentines can cope with it. I remember what a *Porteño* sociologist once said to me: "we speak Spanish with a Napolitean accent; the men dress up like British gentlemen, while their lady friends make up their faces to look just like Parisiennes." I said to myself that this kind of self-analysis would not lead anywhere, but only to self-justification. While in Argentina, I saw that intellectuals shared the same vision of their people as Santos Discepolo, the composer of the tango "*Cambalache*".

The Argentine feeling of failure to construct unity or coherence in their nation sometimes finds its expression in the tango, but also in other kinds of art. One example is Solanas' film entitled '*El exilio de Gardel*' ('*Gardel's exile*'), made in France in 1985 by an Argentine living in exile in Paris during the period of the Videla military government. Above all, the film expresses the fragmentariness of Argentine culture, of which I have been talking. Contrary to expectations, the film was a big success, and the reason for the success, I assume, was the fashionability of post-modernism in Paris at the time. I do not think that many Parisiens could really penetrate the cultural implications of the film. I believe they allowed themselves to buy what the Argentines wanted to sell as a "post-modern" something. In truth, that something reflected the cultural problem that has been annoying the Argentines for centuries, but the Parisiens bought it without noticing or paying attention to the problem.

The commercial wheeling and dealing represented by this film is relevant to what is called in Argentina "*la viveza*". The term derives from the adjective '*vivo*,' which originally meant 'lively,' but which later took on the meaning of 'cunning.' People have a common tendency to regard *la viveza*, this cunning intelligence, as a necessary weapon for survival, and it was this kind of street smartness that clicked and made Argentine national uncertainty a post-modern phenomenon in a film that sold well to Parisien clients who were tired of their logical modernity.

Those who are without *viveza* in Argentina are considered worthless, plain and simple. Argentine popular culture is based on that *viveza*, even though their high society aspires to modern European and North American cultures.

V

In my discourse to his point, you may have suspected that I am speaking ill of Argentine culture, because I have noted a certain negative sentiment. But such is far from my meaning. I have been content to notice some cultural phenomena that appear in Argentina because of its particular historical circumstances. I find these phenomena extraordinary, but I have no moral judgment to make in conclusion.

Some Argentine scholars have already paid attention to the particularity of *viveza* (smartness, or cunning). For example, Julio Mafúd (1928-), author of *Psicología de la viveza criolla* (1986), tries to analyze it in an objective way. I quote a passage from his book:

The colonists had no sense of being alienated from Nature in the first place. They were not conscious of their alienation from their European ancestral roots that they had so readily behind, nor were they any more conscious of their alienation from the native Indian culture that they had destroyed. That they felt was a simple anxiety, emptiness and frustration, which were the products of the alienation, not a recognition of it. They were left with the only values that made any sense to them, and these were those based on gold and silver. The colonists' sense of alienation became more and more serious, until they finally became, fact, people without a home. Some of them went to the Capital of Buenos Aires where they sharpened their *viveza* as a means of hanging on to what little they had; others, losing everything, became *chantas*, the slang word for swindler. (Mafúd 1986)

What Julio Mafúd is describing here is really a human desert in which nobody trusts anybody. But in my opinion, there is something that Julio forgets to recognize in Argentine society. Despite the disastrous circumstances he describes, Argentina is still a very humane society.

I remember very well a day I witnessed a touching scene in a Buenos Aires subway. There was a sick lady in the subway car, and when she lost consciousness, the passengers shouted so that the car came to a sudden stop. Everything went black. People were calling for a doctor, and in a minute or so, a young man appeared who claimed to be of that profession. The subway started up again and headed for the next station. When the car stopped once again, the young man and some other men helped the lady off the car and onto the platform. What was surprising to me was what happened next. The young man who everybody thought was a doctor asked, in a loud voice, whether there was by chance a real doctor in the vicinity. Fortunately, there was a

doctor, a real one, who immediately came to the sick woman's aid. The young man then quickly disappeared and nobody apparently paid any more attention. He was a sort of *chanta*, a swindler, because he said he was a doctor without being so. But he was humane and smart (*vivo*) enough to give the sick lady a minute of peace. It is undeniable that Argentines lack a sense of mutual trust, and that their society is comparable to a human desert. But, at the same time, we should not forget that it has never become an asphalt jungle, one whose members are constantly ready to kill others. Argentina may have many thieves and swindlers, but there are far fewer killings or rapes than, for example, in the United States of America.

The difference between the two countries seems to come from a difference in social communicability. For example, if an Argentine tries to cheat you with his or her *viveza*, he/she never forgets to communicate with you verbally, and most of the time, with warmth. In the U.S., on the contrary, verbal communication seems to give way easily to physical violence. Despite bad social conditions, the Argentine will not abandon the possibility of mutual communication.

I have the impression that in comparison with Argentina, the United States is a country where social and political pressure is more highly concentrated on the individual. It seems to me that strict laws, rather than interpersonal communications, are what controls North American behavior. Indeed, this is due to the many people from Anglo-Saxon cultural backgrounds which has traditionally been much more lawful than its Latin counterpart.

VI

Now I come to my conclusion. As this international symposium aims to elucidate some problems in understanding other cultures, especially in an ethical perspective, I feel myself obliged to examine my way of understanding Argentine culture. Certainly, we can also question the Argentine way of understanding other cultures. The Argentines seem to be unable to reach an understanding of any other culture because of their feeling of complete lack of cultural identity. What, then, of my way of understanding them?

As you may have noticed, my understanding of Argentine culture is quite limited and not without bias. I lived there, not as an observer, but just as a human being working and living among them, communicating more or less with them, sharing their joy and suffering on their account. In short, I was in love-hate relationship with them.

I admit that some Argentines wanted to make use of me because I interested them. I was from Japan, which meant I was of economic interest. But I have to add that

I still have some good friends out there with whom I still continue to communicate. My life there was a series of surprises and shocks, it is true, but I learned much from their way of thinking and living. I miss them.

My way of understanding other cultures is to give it my best shot. Beyond that, I cannot go, nor can I find a way to make it better. I prefer living in the respective particularities of a culture long enough to assimilate it within my blood and bones. And if I gain enough knowledge of that culture to analyze and synthesize it, that will be sufficient.

It is not my intent to deny the merits of the human sciences, but I think we cannot study other peoples or cultures without committing ourselves to them. Experience in human relations is not the end-all or be-all. I know that people cannot always give one an adequate answer to problems we would like to resolve. But leave them out, and our understanding of cultures would be poor and limited. Personally, I prefer having relationships with people around me, no less so when I am in a foreign country, than observing them from a distance.

Let me say this about the problem of understanding other cultures; there are different ways of understanding, and scientific knowing is but one. Science has many virtues, I admit, but it has no right to assert its superiority over other approaches. My way of understanding other cultures consists first in living them, then removing myself to a certain distance in order to reflect on them, and finally to look back at Japanese culture with eyes newly opened by my experience. In this particular case, I came to better appreciate the highly organized nature of Japanese society after my return from Argentina. At the same time, I could not help but recognize problems in my own society. What struck me most about Japanese society and culture, for example, was the lack of mental space given to each individual. While Argentine people are lacking in their cultural identity, they have a lot of space, not only physically but also mentally. On the contrary, Japanese people are so sure of their cultural identity that each member of the society feels more or less suffocated.

Among the many lessons I have learned from my experience of Argentina, where attempts to construct a cultural identity always prove to be in vain, I would like to tell you of one. The lesson is that any collective identity is a fiction. Ideas about Japan and the Japanese are as fictitious as Argentine notions, or lack of them. The difference between the two countries resides in the degree of social cohesion that makes us believe, or makes us disbelieve in a fictional identity.

Now let me go back for a minute to the Argentine way of understanding other cultures. Some would easily conclude that such a people or such a culture as I have described would never realize any understanding of another culture because of their

lack of a social scheme for establishing their own identity. Where one lacks definition for one, there cannot be a definition of others either.

Let me introduce an Argentine friend who argues against such a negative view. Alejandro Roschishner, a philosopher living in Buenos Aires, has sent me a hint about my question, in his paper entitled "*¿El tango es verdaderamente nuestra identidad?*" (1994) ("*Is the Tango really our identity?*"). Alejandro recognizes that his culture is at the zero degree of ethics, but he gives to it a very positive meaning. Here, from the above paper, is a passage in which he details what he means about the total lack of social and ethical dimension in his own people:

I once read Lévi-Strauss' famous book called *Tristes tropiques*. He says that our faces are not as personal as we usually believe; our faces are codified like linguistic signs, so that our social organization can function well; thus each individual's face corresponds to his or her position in society, and the total number of faces are of limited number, obeying a sort of periodic law. This structural idea of his will never satisfy me. He got the idea by observing the faces of passengers aboard a ship from Europe to America. On the boat, they were surely still Europeans, obeying the "law of facial periodicity," but once they disembarked, what then. What would have happened to their faces? It seems that Lévi-Strauss never thought of that. He had no idea of the transformation of faces, which would have occurred after disembarkation. The transformation is necessarily produced by new environments, new situations, where no code system has yet been formed. Such new faces are almost faceless; they are just '*signifiants sans signifiés*', out of "the periodic law". Faces do exist without any codification, and that is the real case for the Latin American face. We are neither Aztec nor Inca; we have just disembarked, and each of us still has a face under the process of signification. (Roschishner)

Alejandro's answer is clear. He is saying that the Argentines do have their own faces, the most genuinely human faces. They are under the process of codification. In other words, when they choose to be ethical, and when they actually succeed in being ethical, they act so from the bottom of their individual souls, because they have no social constraints to hinder their spontaneous communication with others.

I saw a zero degree of ethics in Argentina. But I also saw a high possibility of understanding others, as well as to establish ethical relationships. Zero does not only mean "nothing"; it can contain "a promise" for the future.

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