

## **SPITTING ON THE BARBECUED MEAT**

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### **Abstract**

From the analysis of a popular Argentinean idiom, this article develops the ways in which a country's inhabitants boycott their homeland through actions of sacrificial desecration. Argentina will soon commemorate the Bicentennial of its independence, and the country owes itself an examination of its history and of its self-condemning forms of language.

Argentina is a pleasant-sounding name, one that we neither stigmatize nor ridicule nor curse. However, there is another side to this. Far from being a hermit's or hopeless man's presentment, curses leveled at nations are a comprehensible part of the construction of peoples and citizenship. What we need to bear in mind is that cursing a living being, no matter who he is, primarily means cursing a name. The names of national cores are admirably fit to blasphemous practices. National aggregation never gathers those willing to share a common environment without leaving residues. There never is a lesser group of citizens who appear indifferent to a whole class of nativist heraldics. Depending on how it is viewed, indifference tends to be more emphatically condemned than is cursing. It stands to reason that, in all times, large numbers of people behave in such a way that their national belonging weighs considerably little. This does not make them feel as if they were rejecting stable, unanimous behaviors toward the collective template. Conversely, the issue of "national feeling" and of the "self-description" of their effusiveness at national identity is necessarily set within a quadrant in which impervious individuals regulate the general agreements. No doubt apathy is an essential component of names' ordinary presence. We do not object to being called "Argentineans" insofar as this protects our liberties. It is a second-degree act, presenting the common sphere as one worthy of esteem while implicitly granting a "nameless" liberty to other aspects of our lives. When I have a coffee at the corner bar or fight for a position at work I am not defined by the name given to the inhabitants of this country but by spontaneous or permanent, off-handed or class-related denominations that turn the common name into a meaningless abstraction.

This is well understood and discussed in patriotic commemorations. It is not for nothing that whoever happens to be making a speech for the occasion emphasizes that "on this day" we are expected to remember an evocation that should last "all the year round." Public memory is haunted by either imminent forgetfulness or by an abstraction that leaves us indifferent or in a state of ceremonial pretence. Like other events which confront public consciousness with values deemed unforgettable, commemoration must work out the paradox of which no ritual is free. If there were no commemoration, we would forget; if commemoration exists, it does not seem to suffice in order to explain a celebration that appears to be excessively artificial, established against the common will by an official signature. A national group's real life is ruled by these very disjunctions. No one feels overly annoyed when she catches herself appreciating as an "Argentine" some event or achievement that seems to deserve celebration. However, a hidden

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desire to curse rules over that part of our consciousness that does not demand any collective sentiment in the practical transaction of daily matters. Such indolence is the modest quota of execration surrounding every national commemoration.

From a hermeneutic point of view, eating a barbecue carries at least half a dozen levels of meaning. A brief listing includes the materiality of the meat as an economic, moral, and even theological issue, the rituals of commensality, which strengthen some sacrificial notion related to friendship, the celebration of nutritional qualities, subjected to some sort of lenient scrutiny that makes us take our time before “cheering the cook”; there are also phantasmatic thoughts about what was called “the care of the self” that confront the individual with the inert and practical web of dietetics, and we should not forget the linguistic connotations of the term *achura*<sup>\*</sup>, which might come from the Inca language but is in fact related to the act of grilling and can be found in Virgil. Lastly, not to mention other considerable dimensions of sociability (raw, well-done, table manners), we have the invocation of Argentinean eating terminology. It would not be too difficult to trace the easily recognizable itineraries of the agglutinating barbecue legend as an Argentinean emblem. We find it in commercials, movies (Postiglione’s *El Asadito*) and in certain lesser myths pointing to our general well being in times regarded as Edenic (masons’ barbecues at the building site). The barbecue may *not* be found in the essence of *Martín Fierro*, which may confirm the void of “local color” predicted by Borges for every national identity when he came up with the sentence “there are no camels in the Koran.” The truth is that *Martín Fierro* is about the melancholy form of the language. In general, literature attributes this sentiment to manners of speaking that precede the desirable construction of social law. Yet in fact there **is** a reflection about the barbecue in *Martín Fierro*: the well known lines about Old Vizcacha: “Si ensartaba algún asao, / ¡pobre!, ¡como si lo viese! / poco antes de que estubiese / primero lo maldecía, / luego después lo escupía / para que naides comiese”<sup>\*</sup>.

“Escupir el asado” [to spit on the barbecued meat] is an old idiom that will not easily disappear from our variety of Spanish. It is about a qualified form of evil. The act itself is truly incomprehensible, for it shows disgusting contempt for something loved by the whole community. Nevertheless, every people has blasphemous phrases in store to express the ways of the outcast or the pleasures of the ungodly. The idiom in question amounts to what someone who despises the ineluctable thread binding the community would say. It verges on the unintelligible. Leónidas Lamborghini called “a repentant saboteur” the lyric version of he who spits on the barbecue, placing him at a point of enigmatic totality. The suffering experienced by Old Vizcacha becomes level with what Argentineans living in the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (this seems to have changed now) might have thought in terms of the social law and its characteristic threats. Spitting on the barbecue, biting the hand that feeds, is a distinctive trait of character that peoples acquire sooner or later. Is it in some way related to the usual forms of massacre that underlie the judgement of social obstacles? Such Argentinean public ideologies as circulate through “the body of what is massive and popular” were benevolences that did not force themselves to reflect on the catastrophe or thought that some obstacles were insurmountable.

Were these faults important? In fact, while popularly spread, classically coined language bears the mark of a hindrance (to spit on the barbecue), the broad ideas of the public that continue to be publicly valid operate without taking it upon themselves to think of the obstacles. Still, Argentina rose from a double game of obstacles, diachronic and synchronic, let us say. By way of simplification, I resort to these two terms that used to be of moment in the theory. In the case of diachronism, the sequence of binary political alternatives is easily detectable, and attempts at breaking the norm have mostly failed when confronted with these alternatives. The discussion about a federal or centralized model of national organization is a legacy that has persisted to this day, and each model has the capacity of vetoing the other. In regard to synchronism, we come across schismatic forms that reshape each social present into heterogeneous life expectations, diverse cultural customs, and radical imbalances in the general

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<sup>\*</sup> Innards. Derived from the verb “achurar” (to gut an animal). [T.N.]

<sup>\*</sup> “If he grabbed some charcoaled meat/Poor old man! I seem to see him/He cursed it before ‘twas done/And then he spat on the meat/ So that no one else would eat it.” [M.M.’s translation]

use of goods. I would like to offer an example in point. The *peronismo* emphatically insisted that it had a rupturist foundational nature. It brought new social literatures and, while it absorbed previous events, it was neither too willing to regard itself as part of a legacy nor did it believe that notions such as leadership and the like were belated replicas of a political-boss mentality. It upheld that it inaugurated a new branch of the social sciences, perhaps a sociocracy somehow inspired by 20<sup>th</sup> century's military and social positivism. This political force, or political name, was tempted to encompass the whole of the national meanings or everything related to Argentine issues. However, it found this impossible to achieve unless it created a new division under its own name, claiming the "authenticity" of the name.

Both cases imply "spitting on the barbecued meat." Let us agree that the idiom is extremely provoking. The mere fact of spitting, which is rude, makes it patent that the human body contains a considerable amount of hidden, viscous humors. We all remember the famous 1902 municipal ordinance that read "No spitting on the floor", a classic normative statement that, in a scale economy, led to the proliferation of spittoons. These are becoming extinct as vestiges of societies that maintained the hazy ideal of gentlemanliness typical of the "white collar"\* classes. The organizations intending to introduce salubrious coexistence supported by a guarantee-based system through a modest control of spitting have failed. The public health ideal failed because of the inefficacy of a paradox according to which the State, by means of a law, was to gather expectoration in a legitimate container. Those of us who have seen the last existing spittoons in train and subway stations, pharmacies, and barber shops know that they stood for the last device of the liberal, individualistic State, previous to the collapse of positivist hygienism at the hands of free spitting in the chaotic streets of our cities. In these same streets, regulations about dog droppings substituted NGO's pet healthiness for spittoon Bismarckianism.

Thus one can understand the significance of defiling the barbecue. Broiling meat is a deliberate foundational act of civilization and, by extension, of the regulation of language. Chewing hot meat must have been simultaneous with the creation of more elaborate, aesthetic forms of utterance. Thus the idiom "to spit on barbecued meat" offers an essential form of condemnation of the conventions imposed by the social law. It is not a transgression committed in the living theater of collective life. I do not know anybody who has spat on such noble meats. However, doing so is a dark reverie inhabiting the spoken language, which utters words not splutters. The impossible act has entered the language as a synonym for the inhibition rising from the delusion generated by the group. It is a self-exploration of historical and daily hindrances. It is the opposite of cheering the cook, a mystic, conciliatory salutation of common rejoicement.

I remember that about half a century ago our University Schools fostered the reading of English anthropologist Mary Douglas's *Peligro y pureza*, which fruitfully dealt with ritual desecration. I keep a dim recollection of it, but the book was as worth reading as the more modern writings by Giorgio Ambagen. To spit on the barbecued meat must have been the dream, come true through its linguistic expression, of the harassment that social conspirators release as a sign of danger and freedom. No one in his right mind would carry out such a disintegrating action under the harsh threat of ostracism, death perhaps. But the ordinary language is wise and, since times out of mind, has treasured an act that is naturally offensive, an injurious archetype that can be associated to the worst of societal and national denial. .

That's why, in the actual facticity of the story, Old Vizcacha spits on the barbecued meat in a seemingly effective fashion. He "*cursed it before 'twas done/and then he spat on the meat/so that no one else would eat it*". This kind of mythical act that the Martín Fierro presents as credible and empirical, as the construction of the reprobate's persona, proves the extent to which the epic poetry of modern peoples maintains the most archaic ideal of purity. Moreover, at least among us Argentineans, it is still the course that enables our research into such memories of the real corpus of our ordinary speech as contain potential warnings and the forever possible utopia of national extinction. The most hateful character produced by the inner poetic vein of a collective continues to enlighten us as much as do our most advanced studies of

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\* In English in the original. [T.N.]

the semantic roots of disagreements. There are many well-known explanations for those. Still, the prohibition in the wise 1902 ordinance appears when all other explanations fail; when the core of the language provides a warning about what is lacking in the arguments that should enable us to understand our own language, that imaginary, so much desired factory of hatred and explanations.

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