

REVIEW

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Capitalizing Contradictoriness: Ranchers between State and Open Range – and vis-à-vis Pastoralists

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Abstract

The article explores and discusses findings from historical, geographical and anthropological research arguing that not simply a capitalist outlook but a footing in the state was crucial to the emergence and development of ranching. It develops the proposition that during a frontier phase, ranching evolved as a social, economic and ecological system of livestock keeping that was predicated on and exploited a duality of structures with the confining state on one side and the open range on the other, both separated and connected by a frontier. This is what makes ranching historically different from pastoralism despite superficial similarities. As pastoralism is increasingly connected to markets, capitalism and society at large, developing properties typically known from ranching, the article makes a case for taking a closer look at historical ranching in order to study transforming pastoral societies of the present.

Keywords Ranching, Pastoralism, State, Capitalism, America, Africa

Introduction

The reality of life and work on a ranch certainly has little resemblance with the businesses that Hollywood's "cowboys" take care of in iconic Western movies.¹ Looking into the historical and anthropological literature on ranching, however, one cannot but marvel at certain parallels between the general findings in this literature and the themes used to enthrall a cinema audience. There is the setting of an epic landscape that is wild and endlessly vast, but never wide enough to avoid conflict over land. There is a non-corruptible sense of justice running through the hero's veins, but only lawless self-help can

restore it. There is a true love's anxious waiting, but only male taciturnity and awkwardness fill the air (apart from bullets). There are many, many dollars, but little care for strategic investment, the saloon and the gambling table being their principal stage design. There is one currency even more universal and prone to self-expansion than these dollars: violence—discharged in magnificent sceneries of natural beauty.

Contradictoriness and ambivalence seem to be the nucleus from which a Western's script has to grow. Far from being incidental, I contend that this contradictoriness and ambivalence have thoroughly shaped the historical formation of ranching as a livestock and social system and make it fundamentally different from pastoralism—up until recently when directions taken in parts of pastoralism are reminiscent of ranching history.

The main thesis of this article is that ranching is historically predicated on a duality of structures that presuppose each other without consciously admitting and partly even negating this state of affairs. On the one side, we have a sphere of centralised governance through a state with market, capital, law and a self-conception of cultural

¹ On "mythology of ranching" Sayre 2002: 78–81. Bennett (1969: 198) notes an interesting effect of inversion with real-world ranchers being influenced by their own media image. Hoelle (2015: 14) points out the importance of the self-perception as "cauboi" following "cattle culture" as practically relevant ideology for ranchers in the Brazilian Amazon.

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superiority; on the other side, we have a sphere of rather sparsely populated vast stretches of land where natural plant growth dominates and where effective state control is so limited that decentralised forms of self-organisation and use of violence play a decisive role. The “frontier” as I explain shortly is the seam that holds both parts inseparably together²—parts that the philosophical and political thinking of the Enlightenment and colonial era categorically separate as “civilization” and “wilderness”.

Why a renewed concern with ranching for the study of pastoralism? When in early research pastoralism was basically seen as a subsistence-oriented economy with no or limited connection to markets, ranching was presented as the logical other form of range economy, one that was market- and profit-oriented, hence capitalist (Ingold 1980; Strickon 1965). However, it has been sufficiently established by now that pastoralists frequently and competently use markets as key components of their livelihood strategy and that markets heavily draw from pastoralists (Kerven 1992; McPeak and Little 2006; Little et al. 2014). It has also been argued that currently, under certain conditions, pastoralists are adopting the capital logic associated with ranching and are incorporating elements characteristic of ranching, such as private property of range land and fencing, into their livestock system (Schareika et al. 2021). Given this state of affairs in the grasslands, involvement in market exchange *per se* does not seem to be a useful category for differentiating between types of livestock systems. More generally, it seems less helpful to distinguish between discrete and static types of livestock systems for the sake of classification, than to study and try to explain the dynamics of transformation they undergo.

It is in this sense that I suggest that scholars of pastoral people take a fresh look at ranching not as a logical form of range and livestock management, but as a historical formation that as a subject of historians and geographers has not been tightly connected to the study of pastoralism (but see Ingold 1980). In a political and cultural context where pastoralists are pushed to account for and even abandon their social values and economic strategies of nomadic mobility, it may be instructive to see that ranching has not simply emerged from a combination of cattle, fenced extensive grassland, private property, markets, profit orientation and rational maximisation, but from a unique history and a complex social and technical infrastructure on which it depended and that was not available everywhere where there was pasture land and some sorts of market outlets for cattle.

Some scholars emphasise the commonalities between pastoralism and ranching (Gefu and Gilles 1990) that are indeed easily perceptible: In both systems, huge herds of cattle follow ecologically defined patterns of nomadic movement, roam over extensive stretches of natural pasture and are guided by herdsmen that are used to highly mobile lifestyles. However, I would rather accentuate the fact that both livestock systems have formed through social and political relations as well as cultural systems of meaning that make them distinct ways of combining the factors land, livestock, labour and exchange (cf. Bennett 1969: 197; Barfield 1981: 119 for also highlighting the difference between the systems). The term “ranching”, then, does not simply cover specific techniques and spatial regimes of keeping cattle, but the configuration of social relations, power, property and value through which the former are achieved (cf. Starrs 1998: 25 building on Webb 1931).

In the following sections, I will present and discuss findings from historical, geographical and anthropological research on ranching mainly in the Americas. I plot this exposition against the backdrop of anthropological scholarship on cattle-based pastoralism (particularly in Africa), but refrain from a side-by-side comparison of the two livestock systems that would repeat much of the established knowledge on pastoralism. The exercise aims at bringing out the proposition that ranching is not simply a system of managing cattle production and marketing for profit that, because of superficial similarities, could easily be adopted by pastoralists. It is rather a historical social-ecological system that has been connected with society at large in ways that have produced distinct, mutually effective and transformative dynamics between the two. In order to understand these dynamics, I will take a historical look into the formative phase of ranching, thereby distinguishing an initial frontier from a subsequent landscape and system building and a potential going-beyond-cattle phase of ranching. Throughout, it will be pointed out that the economic, social and cultural processes at work in the formation of ranching have been fundamentally different from those presented for pastoral societies until around the turn of the century. Since then, however, a fair amount of research on pastoralism is showing dynamics of transformation that resemble observations made in the history of ranching (e.g. for Kenya, Reid et al. 2008; BurnSilver et al. 2008; see also Behnke 2018). It is exactly for this reason that I see the relevance of a renewed engagement with the latter.

My broader argument drawn from this exercise consists of three tiers of which I develop only the first in this article; I shall just briefly mention the two following ones as well. First, the formation of ranching, different from that of pastoralism, is necessarily predicated

² Rivière (1972: 1), by contrast, emphasises the discreteness of frontier and market.

on the existence of a (proto-) modern state with which it stands in an ambivalent and contradictory relation due to its being set on frontiers of violent colonisation. This plays out from the very beginning, the frontier phase of ranching. Second, due to a combination of loose political regulation on the frontier, capitalist profit orientation and market competition, frontier ranching ultimately degrades its base of natural resources and turns from an extensive form of using rangelands into a landscape and system building³ phase where the need to manage livestock production and markets through large-scale capital investment (such as in fencing and soil working) on privately owned land as well as through political lobbying intensifies the relationship between ranching and the state as a provider of institutions and infrastructure. This can be very well seen, e.g. in the history of ranching in the USA since the second half of the nineteenth century. Third, once ranching had been so comprehensively commodified during the twentieth century that not only its entire range of production factors but also its cultural ideals and the sentiments attached to it could be recognised as tradable value, a path towards a going-beyond-cattle phase of ranching has been opened. This is particularly visible in tourism and recreation, housing and real estate and the fashion sector, and anywhere else where ideas of “freedom” or “nature” play a major role in lifestyle-based consumption.

While despite the superficial resemblance, ranching differed substantially from pastoralism during its early frontier phase, the dynamics that mark its landscape and complex system-building phase are increasingly showing in parts of the twenty-first-century world of pastoralism and can be instructive for their understanding. The going-beyond-cattle tendency also seems to have gained increased economic relevance in pastoralism (as in the marketing of cultural performances) tapping on variants of romanticism that, as in the case of ranching, muse ideas of “nature”, “freedom”, “pride”, “origins” and, ironically, “precapitalist society”.

I will now turn to mediaeval Spain as the breeding ground of ranching to develop the argument.

The formation of ranching on the Iberian frontier

While the concept of the frontier is regularly applied to the history of ranching in the Americas (e.g. Duncan Baretta and Markoff 1978), it is notable that C.J. Bishko puts it centre stage to explain the formation of ranching

in mediaeval Spain (Bishko 1963). Iberian frontier ranching was the forerunner to cattle keeping and culture in Middle and South America.⁴

Ranching as a large-scale production of cattle for hides and beef on extensive and arid grasslands evolved in the twelfth century under Alfonso VI and Alfonso VIII of León-Castile (Bishko 1952: 494). It was related to the Reconquista colonisation of the Andalusian plains and other parts of southwestern Spain from the Moors. In this historical situation of pushing southward a frontier led by cattlemen and backed by policy and power of the royal state, ranching formed its key features—features that were to mark cattle-keeping in the Americas (see also Butzer 1988; Morrisey 1951).⁵

It was an enterprise of ambitious, individualistic people who as aristocratic warriors were ready and trained to use violence in order to conquer expansive lands that due to lacking security and effective governance, depopulation, aridity and other difficulties were not (yet) suitable for agriculture. Instead, there were cattle derived from *Bos taurus ibericus* that were feral, capable of living in the wild with little supervision and suitable for producing beef and hides. They were managed by herding techniques based on horse riding and allowing enormous herd sizes (going into thousands). Such cattle enterprises constituted a combination of aristocratic family ownership of cattle and dependent herds-men where an increase in stock was not related to family expansion by supplementary spouses and children. Livestock was important and profitable, but to a mediaeval aristocratic elite, ownership of land was key. For them, the pioneering progression on the frontier meant future compensation in land titles from the public domain for their conquest of territory from the Muslim Arabs to the Christian kingdom of León-Castile. Social relations were regulated by values of dominance, masculinity and

³ Thomas Hughes (1983), widely cited in the Science and Technology literature, has developed the notion of the system builder with regard to Thomas Edison and the electric light. Edison engaged in building the whole social and technological system within which his invention would be an answer to a problem. See also Specht (2019) for an analysis of ranching as but one part of the meat industry.

⁴ Jordan (1993, ch. 2, 3) and Sluyter (2012) provide evidence and discussion of the role of (West) African influence (including from Fulani pastoral culture) on ranching culture in the Americas. The use of African slave labour on the Antilles is supposed to be a major factor for the integration of African ideas into American ranching.

⁵ When speaking of livestock in mediaeval Spain, one has to point out that sheep were economically and politically more important than cattle. Valued for their wool as a commodity in high demand in international trade, since the twelfth century Merino sheep were at the core of an industry that integrated transhumant sheep production, the state, the ecologically diverse regions of Spain, the hierarchical rural and urban society, the Reconquest, the regulation of land ownership and access to resources and international trade within a structure of multiple interdependent relations. The famous Mesta association of sheep owners provided sophisticated institutions of self-organisation, but also of state control and regulation that protected and privileged transhumant sheep herding over arable farming. It also promoted trans-local negotiation for pasture between animal and land owners and the monetisation of transactions within the process of production (particularly the provision of pasture), marketing, and taxation (Klein 1920; Phillips and Phillips 1997; Vicens Vives 1969).

honour that supported the use of violence against enemies and the assertion of one's will.

While the landed livestock production units were thus organised within the feudal order of Spain's rural space, they were systematically connected to a diversifying, technologically developing, urbanising, growing and internationalising economy where there was not only demand for livestock as food, but particularly for construction materials and tools (hides and tallow from cattle, wool from Merino Sheep), and means of transport for urban dwellers and for various enterprises of artisanry, building, industry, mining and military interventions. This side of the economy absorbed rural wealth in the form of livestock and allowed to generate profit from it in the form of money.

With this latter observation, we start to see the opposition of two orders alluded to in the introduction. There was on the one side a rural land-based elite engaging in a project of aristocratic self-aggrandisement through the ample use of violence and seigneurial rule over large estates filled with animals and dependent herders (on economy and society in mediaeval Spain see Vassberg 1984; Vicens Vives 1969); on the other hand, there was an increasingly centralising and bureaucratising form of state that was transcending so-called traditional or pre-modern forms of state and acquiring highly effective and comprehensive capacities to govern large, socially and economically differentiating populations in a unified territory (Pierson 2011). Such opposition, as I suggest, has been a prerequisite to the emergence of a livestock system later called ranching. In contrast to pastoralism, it developed as a mediator between these contrasting orders, thereby integrating their difference and contradictoriness within a single encompassing system.

During its formative, frontier phase in the Americas, ranching would use the unique properties of cattle to exploit the opportunities that a frontier between a state that was about to be modern and an extensive realm marked by the absence of that state offered. Ranching, in fact, pitted the two orders against each other bringing the resources of one side of the frontier to the other and vice versa to exploit them for its advantage each time. Ranching, therefore, was constantly in coalition *and* in conflict on two sides and driven forward by the dynamics arising from this state of affairs.

While this structure of contrasting orders was a condition to the very operation of ranching during its frontier phase, the forms it took and its relevance changed when open space shrank due to colonisation and increasingly effective state governance and when ranching had to invent strategies of landscape building. However, even in strategies of going-beyond-cattle ranching as in present-day recreational ranch resorts for urban customers

features of the contrast such as categories of identity, social values, spatial arrangements or cultural orders of meaning are not only perceptible but constitutive of the business itself.

The rise and diversification of ranching on the American frontier

While mediaeval Spain's ecology, economy and society provided an environment where the basic elements of ranching as a livestock system could form and assemble, the Americas provided the many frontiers, since Columbus' second journey, on which ranching developed into a distinctive type (with multiple sub-types) and a paradigm of livestock husbandry of global proportions.

Jordan (1993) offers an impressive historical account of the development of ranching in the Americas that highlights the multiplicity of sources (including beyond mediaeval Spain, West Africa and the British Isles), relations and pathways of diffusion, local specificity and diversity, instability and change, internal and external historical dynamics and systemic ecological and economic factors. Jordan's book is complemented by a range of earlier and later historical and geographical publications that corroborate the view that ranching was not simply the result of consequently treating cattle as capital or the application of capitalist market mechanisms on livestock in arid and expansive range lands. Still, despite the diversity and historic specificity of ranching, there are commonalities that emerge from the dynamics that the core elements of ranching set in motion.

I have so far elaborated my main thesis that pastoralism and frontier ranching despite a number of superficial similarities are two categorically distinct systems of social, environmental and human-animal relations. Moreover, the development of ranching was predicated on a historical scenario of colonisation where extreme opposites merged within one dialectical unit of contradictions: state, law, market and an urbanising society of citizens on the one side and extensive rangelands beyond state control, primary production, individual freedom and, if seen necessary, violent self-assertion on the other. The frontier was the contact zone of these two opposites; here, ranchers exploited the unique opportunity of capitalism gone wild. In the following sections, I assemble and discuss more detailed findings from the literature on ranching mainly in the Americas in order to substantiate the points already made and to elucidate the dynamics of ranching in comparison to those of pastoralism.

Thinking of America's early cattlemen in simplistic terms as bold and brutal pioneers into vast and allegedly ownerless wilderness risks missing a most important point that defines ranching as a distinct livestock system. Ranchers, through their visions, values and cultural

imprint, but most importantly through their social networks embodied and therefore carried with themselves what was enabling their course of action in the first place: the state. As unwashed, undisciplined, uncontrollable and rowdyish a *cowboy*, *gaucho* or *vaquero* might have come along in the *prairie* or *pampa* (cf. Slatta 1992 on such representations), his trail eventually led straight back into the highest ranks and most sophisticated forms of modern state society and commerce. Different from pastoralism that is providing a non-state-based social-ecological system of being in the bush and of producing society through keeping and propagating herd animals (cf. Ingold 1986: 168), ranching would not survive a day in the wilderness it so glorifies, if it were not for the lifeline with its original creator, the state.⁶

This counter-intuitive proposition is best explicated through the details of a concrete case. The classical study of Chevalier (1970) on New Spain during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries is very instructive here. His historical account reveals that even though the territory of today's Mexico was vast and thus afforded many opportunities for self-determined initiative, it was by no means void of structuring scripts for action. When the Spanish conquerors explored hitherto unexplored territory in what would later become Mexico, their very act of doing so was already structured by the royal provisions and thus contained the social order represented by the Crown in Madrid, roughly 9000 km to the east and across the Atlantic Ocean. The leading conquerors, e.g. held the king's offer of administrative positions in newly founded cities and provinces as remuneration for their military services. In accepting this sort of "payment", conquerors not only pocketed in their gain, but also inscribed Spain's political and judicial order into New Spain's territory the very moment they set foot on it. In using the authority of these positions in order to gain superiority and power over their compatriots and other dependents in New Spain, they automatically submitted themselves to the ultimate source of that authority, the king of Spain.

This does not mean, of course, that the social and political elite in New Spain did not use their power together with the opportunities that the landscape and spatial conditions offered in order to defy particular orders and institutions that impeded their economic and political projects. Chevalier's book is full of cases that document the ruses, acts of manipulation, acceptance of benefits by a public official and abuse of authority, through which

Spanish aristocrats and somewhat later rich merchants⁷ established control over land, labour and resources, ultimately through state-sanctioned land titles. Chevalier's book is also replete with references to ordinances and penalties through which the viceroys of New Spain tried to curtail such offences. These were, however, with limited success: The issuing of, first, offices and then land grants to an elite of rich and influential men led to the creation of immense estates⁸ and their concentration in the hands of these very rich and influential men that had their cattle property managed by dependent labour.

Thus, the means to control land and resources necessary to build livestock enterprises in sixteenth/seventeenth-century New Spain were in the hands of an aristocratic elite at the top of an extremely hierarchical society. And they consisted not simply of guns and powder, but most importantly of paper and seal.

*Although the soldiers and like social types left the most significant imprint on the population of the country ... they were far from alone. Among the newcomers were, or soon would be, jurists, theologians, and missionaries, who represented a small minority of the mass of immigrants but whose importance is out of proportion to their number. Some of the conquistadors either had studied or possessed a smattering of law. ... The smallest expeditionary force included a notary to take care of the numerous legal documents, which were accompanied by a series of symbolic and formalistic flourishes, such as the *requerimientos* (inviting the Indians to surrender before a battle) or the taking possession of a region in the King's name ... (Chevalier 1970: 29)*

The Spanish colonists' appropriation of land and labour for ranching on the frontier was, therefore, marked by two different registers of social practice: first, in dealing with the indigenous inhabitants of that land, through colonisation, paternalistic protection, extrusion, subjection, requisition of labour and dues, violent expulsion and killing, and second, amongst themselves, through the recognition of property and use rights within the legal framework sanctioned by the Spanish state. Ranching in New Spain was thus not the offspring of the opportunity of violence in the absence of the law on the frontier; its very establishment depended on people who cooperated and coordinated their action against others through the institutions that a state, its regulations and sanctions,

⁶ It has to be pointed out, though, that there are cases of nomadic states, particularly in Asia (Sneath 2007; Eisenstadt 1963). Ibn Khaldun's analysis of the instability of these pre-modern forms of state has been taken up in the anthropological literature (e.g. Lindholm 1986).

⁷ On the important role of merchant capital for ranching in Argentina cf. Brading 1978: 123, 127.

⁸ These were not yet called *ranch* but *hacienda*. The Spanish word *ranch* referred to a portion of land in the outer space of large estates called *hacienda* leased out by their owners to another occupant (Chevalier 1970, 287–288; see also Brading 1978).

even though seemingly distant, afforded them. It is not trivial in this context to point out that the “unlawful” presupposes the law and the fact that this law governs the affairs of the majority of the people. It is against this backdrop that the advantages of “unlawful” behaviour come into being. Breaking a rule is not creating a situation of not having rules, but of having rules for everybody except oneself. This is a situation entirely different from the comprehensive systems of self-organisation and self-help found in pastoral societies.

Being out of easy reach because of geographical distance and inaccessibility of terrain was, of course, a very important factor that enabled ranchers to not respect and thus break the rules. However, the difficulty of control and governance coming with exactly these qualities of the conquered land also fostered dependence on the power of the state machinery. In areas (particularly to the north) where the Spaniards were exposed to attacks by indigenous groups (called “nomads” by Chevalier), road building, military bases, the founding of towns, the promotion of settlement within structures of civil law and missionary activity amongst indigenous groups were the means to gain the upper hand.

Even more important to the Spanish elites might have been the fact that ranching as a long-term project of building an aristocratic family estate for generations to come could not content itself with a casual and opportunistic taking of land, labour and resources through force. However strong the power of a local holder of large estates and their associated private armies and however weak the assertiveness of the Crown’s agents at a particular time and place, the former would eventually seek recognition of his property within the established order of the latter (just as a bank robber would eventually want to put his loot into a well-secured bank). The order of the Spanish crown was the utmost limit of the space of imagination within which a stable and enduring existence of property and its family was thinkable. And in exactly this form it was present and available as a structure for ranchers’ action even when the openness and wilderness of the geographic and social space could have made alternatives possible.

New Spain’s cattle barons did not only politically and legally depend on the state, but they also depended on the state as the provider of a complex economic system within which cattle were not essentially fed into direct human consumption, but into proto-industrial processes of manufacture (in oversea Spain), mining and agriculture. The outlet for cattle from ranches was not people buying food but segments in a value chain that ended, in New Spain, as silver, sugar and hides shipped to Spain. Ranching provided cattle as crucial raw materials (hides and tallow) and means of transport particularly in mining

and as food to workers and soldiers. It was thus systematically connected to a proto-modern state whose centralised, impersonal and advanced bureaucratic governance could integrate highly diverse and dispersed production steps into a coherent operation at such a scale and support economy and society by tax-based large-scale and long-term investment such as road-building or military defence of territory. In order to be part of the commerce within this economic system, ranchers—different from pastoralists—had to make themselves an integral part of it and therefore of its overall legal and political framework.

It is noteworthy that in its self-image ranching de-emphasises the enabling and fostering role of the state as its fundamental condition; it has rather promoted the idea that it was born from and eternally tested by the force of wild “nature”. The reason for this attitude lies in the mentioned fundamental paradox of ranching. It uses cattle combined with the institutional resources of a state in order to gain domination over the not yet effectively governed domains of that very state.⁹ This is where the patterns of self-organisation and self-help characteristic of pastoralism, including their structurally constitutive element of violence, become important to ranching.¹⁰ They superficially resemble pastoral society but eventually are of a different nature. Pastoralism is creating society from personal, especially structured kin relations, through keeping and propagating herd animals. Ranching is livestock keeping within and for a state society that provides the institutions, infrastructure and opportunities for being linked into complex value chains.

I shall clarify at this point that my use of the term “state” here is restricted to centralised bureaucratic systems of governance, distinct from so-called traditional states. These do not only have the force to exact tribute from a subdued population and rule it by coercion but rather build on a combination of administrative and military capacity to manage economic and commercial development and effectively claim the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical violence within an extensive, clearly delimited territory. Taxation, impersonal regulation and surveillance of their subject population, increasingly conceived as citizens rather than dependants of various local rulers, are key features of such a state.

⁹ Cf. for the USA Starrs 1998: 27: “In sorry contrast to a cherished image of themselves as the ‘ultimately independent Americans,’ western ranchers never managed full control over their lives. Eastern monies ... kept westerners in contact with, yet in thrall to, eastern interests.”

¹⁰ Pointing out that pastoral societies are structured by a potentiality of violence and self-help (e.g. Lewis 1961; McCabe 2004; Peters 1990; Spencer 1988) allowing them to do without or circumvent centralised bodies of authority (typically the state) does by no means negate the proposition that they do have elaborate institutions of peaceful and communal conflict resolution operating at various societal levels (Bassi 2005; Schareika 2010).

While the term “modern state” captures exemplars that have fully (or at least largely) removed elements of a feudal order, their immediate precursors in Europe’s early modern period, particularly the absolutist state, already showed these features.¹¹

Having drawn on the classic work of Chevalier in order to bring out some detail on the nexus between ranching and the state, evidence on this theme can also be gathered from other historical scholarship on ranching in America. The accounts, e.g. of Amaral (1998), Brading (1978), Slatta (1992) or Sluyter (1996, 2012) on Argentina and New Spain, show clearly that there was a systematic interlocking between state institutions and ranching that was developing over time and particularly geared towards sanctioning, managing, controlling and protecting private property of land and livestock and the use of dependent labour. Administrative technologies of the state such as written and archived inventories of property (lasting for centuries and eventually used by contemporary historians¹²), land grant-registers kept in urban political centres, viceregal ordinances, land privatisation and titling, official inspection tours, setting of fixed boundaries, actionable laws of inheritance, criminalisation of hitherto unregulated behaviour (such as trespassing private land) and its penalisation (e.g. with forced military service), judicial protection of creditors and enforcement of debt service or an entire rural code made up a complex set of institutions that would be integral to even rather mundane ranching activities such as roundup or branding. However, the same literature also clearly shows the said ambivalent and contradictory relationship between ranchers and the state where the former took advantage from the initially limited capacity of the latter on the frontier.

Open range

Land that attracts livestock keepers has two basic properties: it is something (the positive), and it is the absence of something (the negative). Livestock keepers take advantage from both these properties. But one could say that the negative qualities of the land, i.e. what it is not, is what certain livestock keepers find particularly appealing. They benefit from the fact many people in the world find the land, that they are looking for, lacking: rain, soil, trees, shelter, security, law, ownership of land, morality, sanitation, health service, urbanity, entertainment (cf.

Walker et al. 2009: 734 and their application of a “Thunian-based political ecology framework”). The lack of two more abstract properties makes this kind of land even more difficult for many people: temporal and spatial stability and regularity. Anything useful or harmful can come anytime and can be found anywhere (cf. Behnke and Scoones 1993). Both, heterarchical pastoralism and capitalist ranching, value the alleged “no man’s land” for the freedom and agency it affords them; both specialise in the capacity to handle the conditions of life there.

For pastoralism, this is bushland for family herds of graziers that, as in many parts of Africa, is used under a regime of open access or community management (Moritz et al. 2013) and may border on lands used by other ethnic groups, particularly of farmers and city dwellers with whom they form complex multi-ethnic regional systems (cf. Burnham 1979). The occupation of livestock keeping, its habitat and ethnic identity and endogamy constitute a stunningly stable configuration in pastoralism that the inhabitants of such a multi-ethnic environment easily understand. In fact, this widely shared understanding of a world composed of occupational ethnic groups such as “the Fulani herders” and “the Hausa farmers” is the basis for their intense interethnic cooperation and conflict.

For ranchers, before they become landscape builders, the “no man’s land” is the wilderness, the “land for nothing” (Sheridan 2012: 137), enemy’s country, a zone of unlimited (colonial) expansion and appropriation (cf. Ficek 2019). Here they live out a number of cultural orientations that Smith and Martin (1972: 218 ff.) call “ranch”, “land” and “family fundamentalism”. Even though ranching depends on the market, the strong values attached to these fundamentalisms can sometimes override ranchers’ rational calculation. Quite a number of different processes have overlapped each other to produce the human-environmental relation characteristic of ranching. Let us start with the role of the colonial state. As ranchers moved out of its orbit, they nevertheless pursued its main goal of expansion, e.g.:

After the Paraguayan War, ranching increased in economic importance in Brazil and contributed to the gradual integration of remote regions into the nation and, if incompletely, to the spread of market capitalism into those areas. (Wilcox 2017: 8)

The state thus backed ranchers as their potential outposts (cf. Elofson 2000: 82). It may have sent troops to help them expel competitors (particularly indigenous people; Morrisey 1951: 116), financed infrastructure projects (roads, bridges, railway) linking them to markets and legislated in order to secure land property. Thus, even the most pioneering rancher embodied the state as

¹¹ Pierson (2011) usefully presents and discusses these features of the modern and pre-modern state, building *inter alia* on the work of Giddens (1985), Tilly (1992) and Weber (1978).

¹² Worth mentioning here is the passage where Sluyter (2012: 19) describes how his discoveries in the archives of land grants called *mercedes* made him realise it might be possible “to locate the very first cattle ranch in New Spain” after the fall of the Aztec empire in 1521.

he confronted the open range in order to appropriate it through marketable cattle.

In their orientation to market cattle, ranchers on the frontier valued the state of “wilderness” for its potential of primary production, but not for its ecological diversity (Walker et al. 2009). They prioritised the potential for natural growth of both, pasture and cattle, over creating value through human labour and heavily expensive infrastructure investment (cf. Starrs 1998: 11). This is why in a “profound neglect approach” (Elofson 2015: 92),¹³ they privileged the prairie or pampa as the source of natural growth and feral cattle (Jordan 1993: 9; Sheridan 2012: 134) as animals that could prevail and grow in the wild in huge numbers and still accommodate the needs of colonial society’s growing consumption. However, everything else in the complex socio-ecological system that could interfere with the growth of the cattle herd, they perceived as enemy: plants other than grass were weeds (and to be set on fire, Wilcox 2017: 165–170; Walker et al. 2000), other grazers were competition, predators were rustlers. Early ranchers’ approach to rangelands was therefore often violent and destructive. Ranching thus operated by undermining its own foundation creating two characteristic answers to its homemade problem: It first expanded ever further into open grasslands (Jordan 1993: 11) and then, when this was no longer feasible, managed the range through private property, technology and knowledge that its foundation in the state, science, industrial production and commercial system would provide (Woods 1989; Sayre 2017). This step marks the turning away of ranching from its frontier and into its landscape building phase.

Reports of early ranching underline its quasi-pastoral form of land use (Bennett 1969: 180–181). The formative phase of cattle keeping in the Caribbean and South America was even marked by ownerless cattle that had gone wild in the course of conquest and warfare and then multiplied (Jordan 1993; Ficek 2019; Nibert 2013). Initially, ranchers did not own rangeland as private property, but moved from pasture to pasture on formally public land, the “open range”. The animals were let go freely without confinements and given no or little care (Rivière 1972: 47–52; Perramond 2010: 28; Jordan 1993: 7; Sheridan 2012: 136; Wilcox 2017: 19, 40; Douglas 1989). The roundup was the typical form of human-animal interaction and served two purposes: branding the private property status (Chevalier 1970; Dusenberry 1963) and preparing for the trek to the market (cf. e.g. Rivière 1972: 62–67). The cattle breed was selected for its ferocity and robustness. While this trait made *laissez-faire* herding easier, it eventually conflicted

with consumer expectations and became therefore subject to strategic modification.

The ability to feed enormous herd sizes with very little human labour was one advantage of keeping cattle on grasslands under an open access regime (Specht 2019). Its lack of effective law enforcement and governance by the state was another (Sheridan 2012: 144; Starrs 1998: 26; Elofson 2000). This meant that ranching land, at least in its early phase, was an Eldorado for individualism under the rule of violence (Morrisey 1951: 116; Nibert 2013). This showed in numerous social phenomena characteristic of the frontier ranching zone. It was a catchment for free-floating drop-outs, soldiers of fortune and adventurers, including people wandering outside the standard moral and legal confines of their home society, e.g. as vagabonds or cattle thieves (Chevalier 1970: 148; Slatta 1992); these were hired as cowboys or cowhands by stock-owning ranchers who, partly, were absentee entrepreneurs not living themselves in the ranching zone (Jordan 1993: 8; Brading 1978: 121). Armed and trained in the frontier culture of violence these people could serve their bosses not only as cowhands, but as gun fighters in all sorts of extra-legal conflict. The violence and lawlessness in these conflicts played a decisive role in the formation of structures of access, property and power on the ranching frontier (Sheridan 2012: 136, 144; Chevalier 1970: 170; Morrisey 1951: 117; Elofson 2015: 64–65). Later on, however, when these structures had been established, state and law were mobilised to fix and secure them (Wilcox 2017: 40; Bennett 1969: 180).

One could be tempted to see a parallel between Evans-Pritchard’s picture of pastoral Nuer land as an “ordered anarchy” and his portrait of Nuer men as “they strut about like lords of the earth” (Evans-Pritchard 1940: 182). The cult of masculinity, fierceness, violence and honour (Bennett 1969: 177–178; Duncan Baretta and Markoff 1978: 612–15; Perramond 2010: 125–27; Sarmiento 2014: 49–52; Slatta 1992: 118; Strickon 1965: 243) may indeed be distantly similar in both social systems as they share a key element in a regime of violence where violence is potentially coming from anybody, anytime. Violence does not simply achieve its social results by being executed, but rather by being flaunted and threatened, by being made recognised as a potentiality. Exemplary acts of terror, authentic displays of capability and determination as well as codes of honour, the promise to be aware and twitchy of the faintest sign of attack and ready to strike back with force (Pitt-Rivers 1966) are therefore quintessential for such a regime of violence.¹⁴

¹³ Jordan (1993: 213) speaks of a “pervasive neglect of livestock in the Texas system” and its “carelessness”.

¹⁴ To express this point with a passage from Sarmiento’s “Facundo”: “The gaucho boasts of his valor like a trooper, and every little while his knife glitters through the air in circles, upon the least provocation, or with none at all, for the simple purpose of comparing a stranger’s prowess with his own; he plays at stabbing as he would play at dice” (Sarmiento 2014: 49–50).

They can be expected either where the state is absent or far away as in pastoralism or on the ranching frontier.¹⁵

However, the community structure of a heterarchical pastoral society is a completely different form of statelessness. The successful frontier rancher did not use cattle according to cattle logic (Schareika et al. 2021) to grow within and as part of his community even though egalitarian values and manners typical of pastoral society like hospitality and neighbourhood solidarity were upheld (Bennett 1969: 178; Rivière 1972: 3). He rather used it as capital to individually consolidate himself or grow out of the soldiers of fortune on the frontier and establish himself as a detached owner of big properties (Chevalier 1970; Duncan Baretta and Markoff 1978: 610; Oetelaar 2000; Perramond 2010: 3). The ranch building in its vast rangelands, isolated, far away from neighbours, was a castle-like fortification for the protection of this property (including the family) not only through its physical structure, but also through the quasi-feudal manners of seclusion and mistrust against strangers it helped to cultivate (Chevalier 1970: 149; Sheridan 2012: 133; Rivière 1972: 83; Wilcox 2017: 151). Some ranchers could additionally use wealth to control and exert means of violence at a local scale by recruiting cowhands *cum* gunmen from the pool of men available on the frontier (Wilcox 2017: 40; Chevalier 1970: 170).¹⁶

The terms “cattle baron” or “cattle king” (Douglas 1989) are therefore quite fitting. They bring out the pretence of rich ranchers to step out of the process of ever pioneering into the hinterland and build order. But the terms equally make clear that such ranchers were ready to order extra-legal violence and exploit the potential of non-governed space for such action—just as their name-giving role models in despotism.¹⁷

Bridging the frontier

As I have already stated, ranchers may adore what they perceive as wilderness and isolation, but their existence is at the mercy of urban life, industrialisation and state

rule. This condition of permanent disruption may explain the melancholy of ranchers’ cultural production as much as forms of going-beyond-cattle ranching such as recreational ranching in modern times (Bennett 1969: 200; Starrs 1998: 151 on so-called dude ranching). Ranching depends on the massive export of cattle to markets following a demand it cannot create at a local scale. It equally depends on the import of state-based institutions, most importantly private property, as well as infrastructure, technology and knowledge.

Ranching, different from pastoralism, fundamentally depends on infrastructures of transport and communication. The faster, cheaper, more flexible and more far-ranging the transport of cattle to the market, the higher and better the profit options. Building on the work of von Thünen, Walker et al. (2009) argue that the profitability of investments into ranching critically depends on the costs for transport and demand in urban centres. When the first are low and the latter is high, even extremely remote and difficult to access areas are of potential value to ranching. Development of transport may first be thought of as an issue of construction: dirt tracks, bridges, ferry service for river-crossing, paved roads and ultimately the railroad and the cargo ship rendered ranching possible as an economic project (Perramond 2010; Sheridan 2012: 138; Strickon 1965: 237; Wilcox 2017). Transport, however, constituted a system of its own with multiple feedback effects between its components that dynamically and rapidly drove an institutional and technical development in ranching (Specht 2019). Railway transport not only reduced costs (Sheridan 2012: 138; Wilcox 2017: 108; Elofson 2015: 51), but the need for walking capacity in cattle and thus allowed for the use of different breeds on the ranch (Strickon 1965: 237; Wilcox 2017: 156, 206). Improved livestock cars, again, allowed to feed cattle during transport (Sheridan 2012: 140). Mobile cooling technology shifted elements of the value chain from urban back to rural areas (Strickon 1965: 236). The way that human labour was involved in the transport system affected the way that the enormous wealth of a herd rounded up for the trek could be secured.

As already noted, pastoralism depends on exchange with other producers (Khazanov 1994), including through market structures (Kerven 1992), and building on diversified livelihood strategies or “multi resource extraction” (Salzman 1971). However, in contrast to ranching, pastoralism does not depend on a systematic integration with market and transport infrastructures. The pastoral system of production, therefore, is substantially less sensitive to market forces. Rather, it offers the market what it holds in excess anyway (cf. Little et al. 2014). Pastoralists, therefore, have until recently emphasised the benefits of relative isolation—the possibility of nomadic movement—over

¹⁵ Elofson (2000: 91) notes even for Canada with its reputation for law and order in the ranching zone and its prestigious North-West Mounted Police (the “Mounties”): “there was considerable gun fighting and it, rather than recourse to traditional legal authority, was frequently the main means of dispute resolution.”

¹⁶ Bennett notes an exception from this scheme for Canada: “[The ranchers] Ed and George didn’t like the homesteaders, and called them ‘land grabbers,’ ... But there was little serious trouble between cattlemen and homesteaders—the presence of the Mounted Police discouraged the open wars that were so frequent in the United States West.” (Bennett 1969: 175–6) On the role of the Mounties in Canada see also Elofson 2015: 85–86.

¹⁷ A notorious form of intrusive behaviour that could possibly be explained away by referring to “mix-up” was the appropriation of stray and unbranded animals. This was widespread, e.g. amongst large ranchers in Canada (Elofson 2000: 86). Such practice had already been one of the major problems that the Mesta in mediaeval Spain had to solve (Klein 1920).

those of improved connectivity to markets and urban centres. For the first decades of the twenty-first century, the literature on pastoralism in Africa documents its immense contribution to livestock commercialisation and (international) markets (Catley and Aklilu 2013; McPeak and Little 2006). Interestingly, this transition comes along with decisive fissures within the pastoral social order. Reminding of some social features in ranching, these include an increasing gap between poorer and wealthier pastoral households, a decreasing chance of poor households to recover from herd loss and stay within pastoralism, enclosure and privatisation of pastoral resources, decline of institutions of inter-household solidarity and rise of employment of hired herders who very often are impoverished pastoralists (Scoones 2020).

Infrastructures of transport and communication are no one-way roads. Their most important feedback effect to pastoralism was first colonial taxation and veterinary care and later non-profit-oriented pastoral development and conservation. In ranching, by contrast, their effect was the influx of strategic capital investment in response to changing market opportunities in the urbanising and industrialising world and changing range conditions on the frontier (Pearce 1964; Woods 1989). Next to sophisticated equipment from industrial production (including wire), this included all sorts of knowledge- or institution-based elements of entrepreneurial experimentation and innovation (cf. Sayre 2002). Equally important as capital was the advent of a more effective presence of the state that replaced self-help and despotism with the rule of law and legal procedures (Specht 2019). We see here again the basic inner contradiction in ranching. Through its very operation that necessitated the improvement of transport and communication, ranching ultimately undermined its own permanent quest for unoccupied, “free” grazing land.¹⁸

Conclusion

It has been pointed out that ranching is bound to markets, money and the chance of making profit out of cattle used as capital investment. It has been asserted less prominently that ranching is bound to the existence of the (proto-) modern state and the complex economy and society the latter is able to organise. Colonial conquest, big armies, huge labour-dependent operations such as mining or plantation and urbanisation are creating the demand that ranchers satisfy and use to expand. Cattle supply, in addition to meat, hides and tallow that have been of great importance to manufacture and industry before petrochemicals were able to replace them substantially.

In its core symbols such as the strong-minded man who withstands the forces of wilderness, ranching downplays its dependence on the state and connection with society and rather one-sidedly celebrates its orientation towards the non-governed side of the frontier; it presents itself as if it had to keep at distance or even flee from an encroaching urban society in order to realise its endeavour. While this latter posture resembles pastoralism, many ranching activities on the far side of the state, especially the violent acts of appropriation and exploitation that mark its frontier phase, ultimately derive their meaning from the expectation that the state, through its administrative capacities, will codify the estates and privileges that only its absence from an alleged ethical no-man’s land allowed to establish. Moreover, early on ranchers, particularly the wealthy and high-ranking, have engaged with the state such that they could influence its policy and legislation to their advantage.

The formation of ranching, therefore, was predicated on a special, highly contradictory and opportunistic double orientation, still perceptible if less operative to this day. Ranching has its front pair of hooves in the lawless and self-help-governed space of open access grassland and its back pair of hooves in the law-based and tightly administered state and the economy it develops. The concept of the frontier captures this dualism ingeniously. The frontier does not simply divide a geographic space into “civilization” and “wilderness” where ranching would be an attribute of the latter. The frontier rather structures a single, but dialectically composed order where each side constitutes itself by negating the values and principles of the other without, of course, dissolving their profitable bond.

What makes ranching different from pastoralism is that this bond, its connection with the sort of society and market structures that the administrative and military capacities of the modern state provide, is not simply a source of opportunities ranching may or may not seize. It is rather its systemic orientation and hence responsiveness—partly inscribed into it without being noticed—towards these structures that define ranching as a form of livestock keeping and explain its economic and social dynamics. To recall one example, when stock cars were invented and liberated cattle from the long trek to the market place, ranchers adopted breeds that were less sturdy but whose tender meat would please distant urban consumers. The gourmet, then, defined to some degree what ranch work looked like. On the other hand—and on the other side of the frontier—, ranchers have actively intervened in the creation and extension of national food cultures and associated industries, thus perceiving of markets not as ready-made outlets at their disposal, but as something to be built and diversified in specific ways that would boost demand for cattle. This is only

¹⁸ Thus Strickon (1965: 248) notes that in the USA, railroads enabled the influx of farmers into the ranchers’ domains in the west.

one example of the extremely high connectivity between ranching and other sub-systems of a complex state society. Such connectivity has its basis in the meticulous details of operational formula—such as literally and figuratively binding technical or legal standards—and that therefore could only develop and mutually adjust over lengthy periods of time.

The general point to be derived from this assessment of ranching concerns its implications for understanding the situation and dynamics of pastoralism in times when “ranching”, simply seen as an alternative form of managing cattle, is suggested as its future. The history of ranching shows that doing ranching is neither a matter nor an effect of simple market orientation and rational choice. Therefore, it does not make sense to think of pastoralists as traditionalists that have to be shown and convinced of “ranching” as the allegedly superior, economically more rewarding and ecologically more sustainable form of livestock keeping. One rather needs to realise that ranchers together with innumerable other actors under the coordinating administration of the state have, for centuries, engaged in complex system building. This historically evolved complex system of which the ranch is but one component (despite its minimising this state of affairs) produces the choices that ranchers seize in their day-to-day herd management; it is not the product of a simple exercise of choice. It therefore seems to make a lot of sense to think of pastoralists as being consistent when they stay within their system of mobile *cattle-cum-community* production when in their environment the high level of connectivity that ranching gets out of the complex system within which it is embedded, simply is not there. Laying the blame for this state of affairs at the pastoralists’ door (if there is one) means ignoring the necessities to make ranching an effective and feasible enterprise for livestock keepers.

A second implication of this assessment of ranching is that studying its history may help scholars when engaging with the present dynamics of transformation in pastoral society and its wider environment. Many activities pushed on by members of pastoral society today attest to their effort at creating and shaping markets and, to that end, at enhancing the connectivity between the pastoral economic and social system and society at large. Sending children to school, opening bank accounts, making delivery contracts with mini dairies, setting up the pastoral household close to a city, building fences for better cohabitation with neighbouring farmers, experimenting with artificial insemination, entertaining networks of business partners through mobile phone, having parts of the family live and work in town, thinking of cold chains, developing attractive functional packaging, monitoring livestock markets

digitally and engaging in pastoral associations and national administrations—these are only some of the interventions that are currently leading to an increased connectivity and responsiveness of pastoralism within a system that is way more complex than itself and thus offers additional opportunities to generate value. The example of ranching invites to study pastoralism from the perspective of such complex system building and the role the state plays in it.

As not all members of pastoral society embrace such transformation with happiness, but feel growing insecurity and fear or experience the loss of wealth, social standing and cultural values, one also needs to ask how contradictoriness pervades and shapes such a complex system containing pastoralism and what it means to the latter. One such contradictoriness is probably the case of impoverished herders who work for wealthy absentee owners driven by the hope to use their earnings to become independent pastoralists again; in doing this work, however, they unwittingly contribute to undoing the world where space is left for independent pastoralists.

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