

# SLAVE COWBOYS IN THE CATTLE LANDS OF SOUTHERN BRAZIL, 1800-1850.

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Perhaps the most striking feature of Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil, in the first part of the nineteenth century was the presence of slave cowboys.

Giuseppe Garibaldi, who had fought for many years in Rio Grande do Sul alongside the black Ragamuffins in the Ragamuffin War, 1835-1845, considered these recently freed slaves among the finest busters, ropers, and horse soldiers in all the province, so famous for its gauchos (1).

Venezuela, Texas, and Cuba had slave cowboys, too, but the data on the social organization and culture in these areas is lacking (2). Slave cowboys in the Spanish lands, it appears, were used in small numbers before the development of large scale plantation agriculture, as was the case in Cuba (3). However, after a search through the secondary socio-historic literature on Latin America, one is left with the impression that slavery and ranching did not mix. Two Pla-

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(1). — Giuseppe Garibaldi, *The Life of General Garibaldi Written by Himself*. Trans. by Theodore Dwight (New York, 1859), 86; The Portuguese crown also considered slaves excellent cowboys. In 1820 the crown ordered four slaves from the Royal Ranch in Rio Grande do Sul to Maranhão to instruct slaves there in the use of the lasso and bolas. Thomas Antônio de Villanova Portugal to Conde de Figueira, Rio de Janeiro, February 16, 1820 Arquivo Histórico de Rio Grande do Sul, (AHRGS), Avisos do Governo.

(2). — Miguel Acosta Saignes, *Vida de los esclavos negros en Venezuela* (Caracas, 1967), 179-180; Philip Durham and Everett L. Jones, *The Adventures of the Negro Cowboys* (New York, 1969), 3-4; Fernando Ortiz, *Hampa afro-cubana; los negros esclavos, estudio sociológico y de derecho público* (Havana, 1916), 482-483. Slaves were also used on "pastoral farms" in Louisiana, William Darby, *The Emigrants Guide to Western and Southwestern States and Territories* (New York, 1818), 76-77.

(3). — Franklin Knight, *Slave Society in Cuba during the Nineteenth Century* (Madison, 1970), 5-6.

tine authorities, the Argentine Horacio C. E. Giberti and the Uruguayan Carlos Rama seem to agree that slaves were not used on the ranches as cowboys because

“the pastoral industry required the labor of skilled, mobile *gauchos* armed with knives capable of individual initiative, characteristics which are incompatible with slavery” (4).

Nevertheless, evidence points to the fact that *riograndense* cattlemen with ranches in the province of Rio Grande do Sul and in Uruguay had made a strong commitment to the use of slave cowboys.

In looking back at this unique ranching experience in southern Brazil, *riograndenses* still boast about the dramatic difference between their attitudes and practices and those of the rest of Brazil concerning race relations. *Riograndense* scholars have found much in their history to support their progressive attitudes, concentrating their attention on the democratic aspects of frontier life and the humanitarian character of the white ranchers (5). In the cattle lands of Rio Grande do Sul, ranchers had broken the original pattern of Luso-Brazilian society as a slave-based plantation monoculture providing massive profits for planters. The evidence presented by those scholars, however, consisting mainly of generalizations about regional character, did not pass unnoticed.

In his careful examination of slavery in Rio Grande do Sul, Fernando Henrique Cardoso unmasked the myth of *riograndense* racial democracy. He focused mainly on slaves who were brutally exploited in the production of salt beef and hides in the province's Lagoon zone (6). This paper, addressed to the early nineteenth century cattle society which employed slaves in a commercialized ranching society, accepts Cardoso's findings on the close correlation between industrial capitalism and social values, but realizes that the relationship between slave cowboys and societal structure is far more complicated than Cardoso suggests. It is argued here that the paternalistic mode of rela-

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(4). — Horácio C. E. Giberti, *Historia economica de la ganaderia argentina* 2nd ed (Buenos Aires, 1961), 45; Carlos M. Rama, “The Passing of the Afro-Uruguayans from Caste Society into Class Society” in Magnus Morner, ed., *Race and Class in Latin America* (New York, 1970), 32.

(5). — Jorge Salis Goulart, *A formação do Rio Grande do Sul* 2nd ed (Porto Alegre, 1933), 55-57; Alfredo Ferreira Rodrigues' introduction to Nicolao Dreys, *Noticia descritiva da provincia do Rio Grande de S. Pedro do Sul* 2nd ed (Rio Grande, 1927), 10-11.

(6). — Fernando Henrique Cardoso, *Capitalismo e escravidão no Brasil meridional: o negro na sociedade escravocrata do Rio Grande do Sul* (São Paulo, 1962).

tionship on the ranch reflected a variety of concerns: the demand and composition of the labor supply, and those problems related to the control and containment of slaves after the decision was made to use them.

In order to understand the position of the slave cowboy, some consideration must be given to the development of the ranch complex. A common feature of the Luso-Spanish rivalry in the southern plains was the vast no man's land or buffer zone, comprising the territories between the Spanish and Portuguese frontiers. Except for the scattered Indian tribes and the famous Jesuit missions, this temperate region was virtually unoccupied in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. During the 1600s, the fertile plains were bitterly contested when Luso-Brazilian slave hunters raided the Jesuit strongholds for Indian laborers. In time the two crowns planted rival settlements, and European imperial wars were extended to this area of the New World.

Large herds of wild cattle in the southern borderlands intensified the struggle in the eighteenth century. The new gold mining regions of Minas Gerais created a demand for fresh meat and mules, which forced *paulista* and *lagunense* cattle hunters and drovers south into the cattle lands of Rio Grande do Sul (7).

The courts of Lisbon and later Rio de Janeiro encouraged the immigration of Azorian agriculturalists and others in the eighteenth century to the unpopulated grasslands for reasons primarily of defense (8). Although this immigration was sporadic and light, Azorian militiamen helped to hold the Hispano-Americans in check, and in the end pushed them south and west toward the Plate estuary. All the time Rio Grande do Sul was developing a robust cattle trade which, by 1800, turned into a large scale industry with the coming of the *charqueada*, or salt beef establishment (9). Confronted with serious droughts, the traditional suppliers of salt beef in Brazil's Northeast could not meet the growing demands placed upon them, so that by 1810 Rio Grande do Sul, still a military outpost, had become Brazil's foremost producer of *charque* and hides, and a valuable supplier of wheat; and there still remained great numbers of cattle and good grassland in Rio do Sul and across the frontier in what is today Uru-

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(7). — For a recent general history of colonial Rio Grande do Sul see Guilhermino Cesar, *História do Rio Grande do Sul: período colonial* (Porto Alegre, 1970).

(8). — On Azorian immigration see Sebalt Rüdiger, *Colonização e propriedade de terras no Rio Grande do Sul: século XVIII* (Porto Alegre, 1965).

(9). — Antônio Carlos Machado, "A charqueada", *Província de São Pedro*, 8 (1947), 121-122.

guay (10). Between 1811 and 1825 the Luso-Brazilians in Rio Grande do Sul came into control of the vast cattle reserves of Uruguay as a province's result of recent wars, funnelling thousands of head of cattle into the salt beef plants in the province's lagoon zone (11). By 1828 slaves composed more than 30 percent of the province's 120,000 inhabitants, in an area roughly one-half the size of France (12). They had been quickly integrated into the interdependent economies of the ranch and salt beef industries.

Even after Uruguayan independence in 1828, riograndense ranchers continued to move aggressively into Uruguay with slaves, capital, and animals (13). Since the age of land management devoted to better breeding and improved pastures was still years away, cattle-hungry riograndenses eyed the naturally better pasture lands of Uruguay instead of looking toward the improvement of what they had. Their immediate need in expanding the cattle culture was solving the problem of bringing more land into production in the absence of an adequate and manageable labor supply.

Although little is known about the internal slave trade in Brazil in general and in Rio Grande do Sul in particular, it appears that the rancher competed successfully with the owners of the salt beef plants for the limited supply of slaves. Lists of riograndense property owners inside Uruguay in the 1840 show that almost all had slaves. In the Chuí and São Miquel zone, thirty-five riograndense ranches held more than 200 slaves (14). Wills of prominent cattle barons and caudillo chieftains recorded the high proportion of slaves in this labor extensive system (15). Obviously all were not cowboys; some served as domestics while others worked in the manioc, maize, and wheat fields. One

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(10). — A. Gomes Carmo, *O problema nacional da produção do trigo* (Rio de Janeiro, 1911), 23; Henry Koster, *Travels in Brazil*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia, 1817), II, 228.

(11). — Agustín Beraza, *La economía en la Banda Oriental, 1811-1820* (Montevideo, 1964), 103.

(12). — Jozé Pedro Cezar, "Mapa estatístico" Arquivo Nacional, Rio de Janeiro, (AN) 776.6 5G.

(13). — Salvador Maciel to Joaquim d'Oliveira, Porto Alegre, May 25, 1829, AHRGS Caixa 39, n. 49.

(14). — *Relatório da repartição dos negócios estrangeiros apresentado a assembléa geral legislativa na terceira sessão da oitava legislatura pelo respectivo ministro e secretário de estado Paulino José Soares de Souza* (Rio de Janeiro, 1851), 41.

(15). — Olyntho Sanmartin, *Bento Manuel Ribeiro: ensaio histórico* (Porto Alegre, 1935), 254; "Cópia do inventário do coronel Bento Gonçalves da Silva", *Revista do Instituto Histórico e Geográfico do Rio Grande do Sul* XXVII (1947), 39-46.

of Brazil's experts in Plate affairs in the 1840s clearly stated that the productivity of riograndense ranches in Uruguay depended on the production of slaves (16).

The following discussion on why the riograndense rancher used slave cowboys is highly speculative, given the lack of statistical information. First, it should be emphasized that slave cowboys never exclusively formed a rancher's labor force. Mestizo and Indian gauchos and peons were always numerically and economically more important than the slave cowboy. Ranchers presumably carried with them ideas on the advantages and disadvantages of placing slaves on horses.

In Brazil's Northeast the white slaveholding elites perhaps

“were compelled to create an intermediate free group of half-castes to stand between them and the slaves, because there were certain essential economic and military functions for which slave labor was useless, and for which no whites were available” (17).

But because of the more intense demographic, economic, military, and political pressures, this solution was not available to the riograndenses, for the province lacked a white and free half-caste population large enough to fill certain interstitial kinds of activities such as ranching. White ranchers were forced by these very pressures to utilize the slave as a cowboy; this pressure also may have contributed to the creation of a free half-caste.

Using slave cowboys did not simply rest on materialist foundations. The profit oriented riograndense ranching class was part of a larger Luso-Brazilian world of tradition, values, and sentiments that had particular and general political interests, as well as economic ones. Once the economic revolution took place, based on the salt beef industry, the entire society began to readjust itself to the new demands. The province continued to suffer, however, from a chronic labor shortage, which was strongly influenced by a number of internal factors, especially the availability of slaves in Brazil, local labor supplies of slave and free labor, and the occupation and/or reoccupation of new cattle lands, which, in turn, depended on the unsettled political situation in Uru-

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(16). — Duarte da Ponte Ribeiro, Rio de Janeiro, May 25, 1844 In *As relações do Brasil com as repúblicas do Rio da Prata de 1829 a 1843* (Rio de Janeiro, 1936), 41.

(17). — Marvin Harris, “Origin of the Descent Rule” in Laura Foner and Eugene D. Genovese, eds. *Slavery in the New World, A Reader in Comparative History* (Englewood Cliffs, 1969), 53-54.

guay. More slaves were required for the lagoon establishments, which absorbed thousands of slaves. In 1832 Pelotas, the province's industrial center, counted more than 5,000 slaves in the salting industry alone (18). On the banks of the Guaíba and along the Jacuí at Triunfo and Rio Pardo there were other salt beef establishments as well.

It appears that slave shipments south were always inadequate; the Atlantic coastal plantation areas received first choice. In addition, many slaves who arrived at local ports in Rio Grande do Sul never remained. During late colonial times Rio Grande do Sul had been a way station for slaves going to the more profitable Hispano-American slave markets in Montevideo, Buenos Aires, and beyond (19). But the Spanish-American Wars for Independence, with their congruent liberal-democratic laws aimed at the destruction of the institution of slavery, perhaps further weakened the province's chances for acquiring additional labor.

To increase its labor force, Rio Grande do Sul was supplied in part by a mutually beneficial intra-Brazilian slave trade. With a minimum of protest from both coastal planters and riograndense slaveholders, the province welcomed slaves who had individually or collectively resisted white authority. Slaves who participated in regional disturbances in Brazil's Northeast often found themselves crowded into ships headed for Rio Grande do Sul (20). Even during the Ragamuffin War, when the whole province was aflame, rebellious slaves continued to arrive (21). More than likely it was easier to augment the labor supply with Africans than with an imported free labor force, even with the associated problems of introducing uprooted slaves whose ties to new owners were no doubt weaker than those of slaves who had spent their lives under one master.

Cattle owners, according to the well traveled French botanist Augusto Saint-Hilaire, preferred Guaraní Indians to slaves as ranch hands, but their numbers were always small, and fewer still after the Uruguayan sacking of the Missões at the close of the War against the

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(18). — Manuel Antônio Galvão to Joaquim Lopes de Barros, Porto Alegre, July 7, 1832, AHRGS, Caixa 155.

(19). — Manuel Antônio de Magalhães, "Almanaque da vila de Porto Alegre com reflexões sobre o estado da capitania do Rio Grande do Sul", *Boletim Municipal*, III (1940), 253.

(20). — John Mawe, *Travels in the Interior of Brazil* (London, 1823), 445n; Francisco Xavier Ferreira, Porto Alegre, April 27, 1835 Arquivo da Prefeitura Municipal de Porto Alegre, Livro de Actas de 1832-1835.

(21). — Dreys, *Notícia*, 191; José Antônio Marinho, *História do movimento político que no anno 1842 teve lugar na provincia de Minas Gerais* [2nd ed?] (Rio de Janeiro, 1939), 244-246.

United Provinces (1825-1828) (22). Ranchers also had to compete for Indian labor with the owners of salt beef plants, who hired Indians to maintain social order and to work at the more dangerous tasks. The government, for its part, recruited the Guaraní for militia service to guard the province's extensive border (23).

Furthermore, in the world of the rancher, slavery served to strengthen the patriarchal system of dependence and compliance, helping to ensure him of a profitable use of all the varieties of labor from the various socio-economic groups on the ranch. Although the rancher used slaves to further his economic interests, gauchos, Indians, and peons were more important; but their response was still in large part voluntary. The integrated work forces worked in another complimentary way. In carrying over the peon-rancher relationship to include his slaves, the rancher avoided discontent among slaves, while at the same time demanded from them the same standards of performance that he required from other peons. Nicolau Dreys, a long time resident of the province, indicated this practice by referring to Negro slaves as peons (24). There were even cases in which slaves served as ranch foremen (25), although there are no reports of their working as trail bosses.

In frontier zones where warfare was endemic and the population light, the use of slave cowboys afforded the rancher the opportunity to improve his chances for control of cattle and cattle lands. When the riograndense cattleman decided to rent, buy, or appropriate land, he had at his disposal an available force of men who could quickly hold and occupy it. Slaves could be considered a reserve military and labor force. When the provincial government called up the militia during the numerous borderland crises with Uruguay, they would request the cattlemen to provide support (26). Unless the situation turned critical,

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(22). — Augusto de Saint-Hilaire, *Viagem ao Rio Grande do Sul*, 1820-1821 2nd ed. trans. by Leonam de Azeredo Pena (São Paulo, 1939), 214; Aurélio Porto, *História das missões orientais do Uruguai* 2 vols. (Porto Alegre, 1954), II, 405.

(23). — José Feliciano Fernandes Pinheiro to Francisco Villela Barboza, Porto Alegre, September 10, 1824; Salvador Maciel to Marques de Maceió, Porto Alegre, January 10, 1828, AN, XM 144.

(24). — Dreys, *Notícia*, 133.

(25). — Octávio Ianni, *As metamorfoses do escravo* (São Paulo, 1962), 61. Although Ianni is referring to Paraná this was probably the case in Rio Grande do Sul as well.

(26). — Galvão to Francisco de Lima e Silva, Porto Alegre, November 5, 1831, AN, IGI 170; José Egidio Gordilho de Barbuda to Francisco de Paula Rozado, February 14 and 19, 1826, AHRGS, Caixa 47, N. 90.

slaves were the last in line for the front, allowing the cattleman to continue with his ranching activities. There is also evidence that by the 1830s the borderland cattlemen, who were setting up their own salt beef establishments on the frontier, would require additional slave labor (27).

When Uruguay was consolidating its independence, Brazilian ranchers were apprehensive about using gauchos and Uruguayan stockmen, whose economic-political loyalties were in constant question. Rio-grandense cattlemen were often caught between the competing politics and small armies of Uruguayan caudillos who viewed the riograndense ranches as military targets for cattle and recruits (28). Every decision vital to the rancher's interests, particularly concerning the ongoing vexing problem of political unrest in Uruguay, had to be carefully weighed. It was not surprising then, that the riograndense rancher inside Uruguay felt more secure with a loyal force of slave cowboys at his back, rather than hired Uruguayan stockmen. Regulating the daily life and defining the gauchos' relations to others were more difficult tasks than doing the same for slaves. In the eyes of the provincial government and many ranchers, the gauchos and vagabonds as economic competitors, killing cattle for the hides alone, were often grouped together as undesirables (29). In a rare show of accord, the governments of Brazil and Uruguay tried to work out military operations, although uncoordinated, to destroy the numerous "bandits" who took refuge in the borderland zone (30).

Riograndense slave society was also a part of a much larger system, and like the rest of Brazil, was subdivided into castes and classes. Slaves in Rio Grande do Sul were more than capital investment, more than a matter for appropriating labor, more than a means to better control the labor of other socio-economic categories in society: the entire social structure of Brazilian society rested on slaves. Possession was directly related to status. Having slaves generated kinds of social competition among ranchers in the province's interior where there was a scarcity of visible consumer wealth.

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(27). — Alfredo Varela, *Revoluções cisplatinas: a república riograndense* 2 vols. (Porto Alegre, 1915), II, 990.

(28). — Galvão to Domingos Jose de Araujo Bastos, Porto Alegre, November 14, 1831, AHRGS, Caixa 16, n. 154.

(29). — *Relatório ao conselho geral apresentado por Caetano Maria Lopes Gama*, Porto Alegre, December 1, 1831 in Jean Roche, *L'administration de la province du Rio Grande do Sul de 1829 a 1847* (Porto Alegre, 1961), 66, 80.

(30). — Conde do Rio Pardo to Miguel Calmon du Pin e Almeida March 8, 1830. Arquivo Histórico do Ministério de Relações Exteriores, Itamarati, (AHI), 299-2-3.

Thus slavery in the cattle lands reduced competition for scarce labor, permitting the easing of tensions among riograndense cattlemen, and provided a work force that the rancher could better organize socially and politically. And for his part, the slave cowboy undoubtedly enjoyed advantages denied to his town-industry counterpart in a number of critical areas: mobility, escape, treatment, and method of work. Accounts like that of Nicolau Dreys were typical; that the slaves in the province's interior were in an "exceptional position", especially for those on ranches "where there was little to do" (31). Descriptions about the slaves' well-being under the mitigating influence of ranch life were accepted as proof of the humane quality of riograndense slavery. But this mildness was purely incidental; a consequence of a social reality of which the rancher was well aware. Strict security measures were unenforceable where the apparatus for repression was weak. Administrative inefficiency and the sheer weight of complex slave laws and codes placed repression and protection in the hands of cattlemen (32). In the day-to-day living conditions of the slave cowboy, he received relatively good treatment. This, of course, did not mean that riograndense ranch society was open. For example, the resultant ease with which slave cowboys could escape might have led to stricter security for other slaves on the ranch. But on the other hand, the ratio of whites to slaves in a geoeconomic environment in which slaves were separated from each other on the ranch and between ranches reduced the need for strict police measures.

Reinforcing this attitude that tended to blur the demarcation between hired hands and slaves were the following factors: the geography of the interior which lent itself to rapid and mobile horse travel; the proximity of a political and social refuge in Uruguay and Argentina; and an inadequate military force which could not deter or catch slave runaways. Therefore, it was very important to promote the slaves' welfare, and by so doing increase the slaves' dependence. Feeding, clothing, housing, and the degree of punishment became part of the standards of decency of the ranching class and part of slave expectations as well.

But the paternalistic system that the rancher controlled was far from ideal. Slaves applied pressure in their own behalf by resisting the imposed order. Slaves on ranches in Rio Grande do Sul, unlike slaves in other Brazilian provinces, received active outside encouragement

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(31). — Dreys, *Notícia*, 191.

(32). — In the towns, as in other parts of Brazil, there were official slave catchers. Arquivo da Assembléia Legislativa do Rio Grande do Sul. Propostas do Conselho Geral da Província do Rio Grande do Sul, 1828-1834 folha 40.

to rebel. Uruguayan republicans and certain dissident riograndenses were willing to accept the military participation of slaves in exchange for a republican system. As early as 1803, slaves appeared in armed republican movements. During the Cisplatine Campaigns both the Spanish-Americans and Luso-Brazilians courted and impressed Negroes into service (33). José Gervásio Artigas, the first hero of Uruguayan independence, first against the Spanish and then later against the Luso-Brazilians, incorporated riograndense slaves into his militia armies. To mobilize an adequate army, he issued emancipation edicts and included ex-slaves into his agrarian reform programs to assure their continued loyalty (34).

After Uruguayan independence in 1828, Uruguayan caudillos who competed for control of the new state carried their struggle into Rio Grande do Sul. In attempts to revolutionize riograndenses, Uruguayans sent secret agents to seduce slaves, and armed bands raided ranches for slave recruits (35). Before the Ragamuffin War in Rio Grande do Sul, there were many cases of slaves fleeing salt beef establishments and ranches, taking refuge across the border or in one of the many fugitive slave settlements (36). Runaway slaves on the banks of the Uruguay River committed "very grave crimes", and armed fugitives made forays into settled areas and disrupted river traffic. Runaways were more than a serious irritant for the rancher, who called upon Rio de Janeiro to arrange treaties with their Spanish American neighbors for the return of their bondsmen (37). It was easier in the end for the rancher to come to terms with Uruguayan caudillos, paying the exorbitant price asked for the slave's return (38).

The above discussion should be viewed as but the beginning of what is hoped to be a series of new dialogues on slavery in southern Brazil. Riograndenses have long known of the use of slave cowboys, without perhaps recognizing the strategies of nineteenth century ranch

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(33). — Diogo de Souza to Conde de Linhares, Maldonado, October 20, 1811 in *Revista do Arquivo Público do Rio Grande do Sul* 11 (1923), 75-78; Aurélio Porto, "Notas ao processo dos farrapos", in *Publicações do Arquivo Nacional XXIX* (Rio de Janeiro, 1933), 510-512.

(34). — Saint-Hilaire, *Viagem*, 56-57; John Street, *Artigas and the Emancipation of Uruguay* (Cambridge, 1959), 227-228.

(35). — Galvão to Domingos José de Araujo Bastos, Porto Alegre, November 14, 1831, AHRGS, Cx. 16, N. 154; Instruções secretas dados pelo coronel José Augusto Possolo in Almeida Vasconcellos to Bento da Silva Lisboa, Montevideo, February 14, 1833 (reservado) AHI, 222-4-2.

(36). — *O Amigo do Homen, e da Pátria*, September 18, 1829, n. 23, 1.

(37). — Almeida Vasconcellos to Aureliano de Sousa Oliveira Coutinho, Montevideo, January 27, 1835, AHI. 221-2-9.

(38). — Galvão to Almeida Vasconcellos, Porto Alegre, July 20, 1832, AHRGS, Caixa. 60, n. 155.

owners. Further, additional investigation is in order to explain the differences between the cattle societies of southern Brazil and its Platine neighbors, which did not use slave cowboys. In these cattle cultures the caste system was destroyed at a much earlier date than in Rio Grande do Sul.