

# ENCOUNTERS AND MISUNDERSTANDINGS IN TOURISM DEVELOPMENT IN BUENOS AIRES PROVINCE (ARGENTINA)

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The province of Buenos Aires has an area of 308,000 km<sup>2</sup> approximately and 15,625,084 inhabitants (INDEC, 2010) and is part of the Pampean region, the most fertile area in Argentina. It has 135 districts, being La Plata City its administrative center. Economy is based on industry (north-west), agrarian activity (center), and a touristic region at the Atlantic coast (Quesada et al., 2012). This region was for many decades the center of tourism development since XIX century (Bertoncello, 2006; Pastoriza, 2011), until in the first half of XX century, when other destinations were incorporated in the tourist circuit of the province. During 1970-90s neoliberal policies were apply by the government, and many amenities and some seashore areas were privatizes. Nonetheless, at the beginning of XXI century the government started to promote tourism industry, using it as tool for local development, incorporating it in every district. Also, new strategies, actions and policies were implemented to achieve that goal.

In this new phase of tourism process, the province and local governments began to put in value every culture, historic and natural element, activity and celebration they have to offer as a touristic attraction. Also, governments created new festivities and activities to diversify touristic offers. Moreover, the incorporation or increase of hotel and gastronomic services were establish and promoted.

In this article two northern districts of Buenos Aires province (Argentina) are comparatively analyzed: Exaltación de la Cruz and San Antonio de Areco, which are located at 80 and 110 km from Buenos Aires city respectively. The aim is to examine some encounters and misunderstandings between tourism policies implemented by the Province and those established by the abovementioned districts. In order to do so, a specific event is examined: the “1st Regional Celebration of International Folklore Day”, which was organized in August 2009 by the provincial government in San Antonio de Areco district. The information used for this article was obtained at extensive interviews with local inhabitants

(tourism entrepreneurs, civil servants, neighbors) of each district, and participant observation. All the information was triangulated with an analysis of documents produced by state agencies, which were accessed either through our fieldwork or through institutional web sites.

## 2. “COUNTRYSIDE” REGION AND ITS TOURISTIC REPRESENTATION

Among the policies implemented by the provincial government it is important to mention the new division of its territory into five touristic regions, considering its geographical characteristics: Beach, Cities, Lakes and rivers, Countryside, and Mountain range. This article will focus on “Countryside” region, composed by 24 districts, including the study cases San Antonio de Areco and Exaltación de la Cruz.

The main attraction of this region is the pampas landscape of Buenos Aires, as well as the *gaucho*<sup>1</sup> figure, two elements that have been legitimized as “national” symbolic icons. Other valued and selected elements which contribute to create a certain type of rurality are: tradicional gastronomy, folk festivals, silver and leather handcrafts, *estancias*, equestrian activities, rural villages, as well as the cultural legacy of immigrant communities. All these attractions are reinforced with brochures featuring the Province as the “Tierra de Gauchos” (<http://www.turismo.gba.gov.ar/marketing/folleteria.php>). In this rural construction Exaltación de la Cruz is presented by its historic city, Capilla del Señor, highlighting that its historic center was declared “Historic Assets of National Interest site” (Decreto N° 1648/94) by the National Monuments, Museums and Historical Places Commission (CNMMLH) and that: “...Su entorno rural enmarca el patrimonio histórico y edificio de este particular pueblo bonaerense” (<http://www.turismo.gba.gov.ar/marketing/folleteria.php>). San Antonio de Areco city is described as: “...un “santuario gaucho”” (<http://www.turismo.gba.gov.ar/marketing/folleteria.php>). “Countryside” touristic region builds a romantic and idealized (Bell, 2006) Buenos Aires pampa. Also, rural transformations started in the 1970-90s by the implementation of neoliberal policies, which create conflicts and contamination by the establishment of gated communities, and other amenities, are omitted (Barros, 1999; Craviotti, 2007). Moreover, San Antonio de Areco and Exaltación de la Cruz make use to the promotion spaces that provincial government has, like the record of festivities in the provincial touristic calendar, web pages, touristic exhibitions, brochures, among others. However, both districts developed their own touristic policies and actions that not always match the ones applied by the province government, as will be discussed below.

## 3. TOURISTIC LOCAL POLICIES

San Antonio de Areco is known as “the Cradle of Tradition” due to the implementation of a number of tourist and economic policies that has been developing since the late 1930s and had continued until today. The “tradition” became its distinctive tourism branch, due

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<sup>1</sup> *Gaucho* is a ranch hands and horsemen of Argentina’s pampas which is considered an iconic image of national rural tradition.

to its main attractions: the Gaucho Museum and Criollo Park “Ricardo Güiraldes”, and the Tradition Festival, where the *gaucho*’s skills and customs are exhibited. Therefore San Antonio de Areco’s touristic policies and the ones implemented by the provincial government invigorate his title of “Cradle of Tradition”. In this case there is indeed an articulation among tourism policies from the municipality of San Antonio de Areco and the government of Buenos Aires province.

Exaltación de la Cruz is a district bordering with San Antonio de Areco. Since the declaration of Capilla del Señor’s historic center as National Heritage, the elements and events mentioned in the National Decree (1648/94) highlight a version of its golden age history that is now being promoted as a touristic attraction. Hence, during the mid-1990s a cultural tourism was organized offering its local heritage as touristic attraction to compete in the regional touristic market. From the beginning, the local government tried to avoid identifying the district with *gaucho* figure as a touristic attraction, because they did not want to compete with the same touristic product that San Antonio de Areco developed.

Accordingly, the image of rurality that the province government divulges is not the one that Exaltación de la Cruz in a local level tries to promote. So, touristic policies of local and provincial government are not articulated in this case. And although Exaltación de la Cruz does not want to activate *gaucho* figure with the intention to detach from San Antonio de Areco, both districts share the folk music and dances representations: through regional folklore music interpreted by local musicians in San Antonio de Areco and through national folklore whether is performed by local or national artists in Exaltación de la Cruz.

#### **4. THE “1° REGIONAL CELEBRATION OF INTERNATIONAL FOLKLORE DAY”**

In 2009 the Department of Folklore of the Province government decided to organize the “1st Regional Celebration of International Folklore Day “. The aim was to promote folklore celebrations through regional events, and San Antonio de Areco city was chosen in that occasion. Although that kind of festivities is not in the touristic calendar of San Antonio de Areco as it is in Capilla del Señor. This situation provoked dissatisfaction in both local governments. In San Antonio de Areco because the Department of Folklore of the province did not respect some requirements that San Antonio de Areco demanded. And Exaltación de la Cruz, because provincial government did not consider other districts that has less consolidated tourism. The analysis of this folklore event exposes misunderstandings and contradictions among the province government touristic policies. On one hand, province government tries to impulse tourism in all districts of the province, remembering that “Countryside” region has 24 localities. In the other hand, when an important event took place, a consolidate destination is chosen. Also, the image that San Antonio de Areco has as “Cradle of Tradition” (and elements related with *gaucho*, tradition and folklore), caused the invisibility of other districts that try to be part of the touristic regional market and has some expressions and celebrations in common. Finally, the “Regional Celebration” of folklore was established as a fixed event in the touristic calendar of the province, but according to interviewed this did not happened.

## **5. FINAL CONSIDERATIONS**

It is expected that future actions and policies applied by the Buenos Aires province government could achieve better touristic strategies, articulating its initiatives with those promoted by the local governments.