

WHO IS A "CHANTA"?

Richard L. Smith

(and Seba)

RICHARD: Many times I've heard the denunciation, "What a *chanta*!" Can you explain what this means? Who is a *chanta*?

SEBA *: It is a colorful and quite abusive expression often thrown about here in Argentina. A *chanta* is someone held in low esteem. The term represents a very negative evaluation of someone's character.

RICHARD: How so?

SEBA: A *chanta* is someone who is quick to boast of what he does not know or possess, someone who is overly confident for no justifiable reason, a person who feigns wisdom and intelligence though he lacks both, and someone who is totally unreliable because his or her word counts for nothing.

RICHARD: Sounds bad! I hope I can avoid that epitaph! But, on the other hand, in its broadest sense the description reminds me of the biblical "fool."

SEBA: What do you mean?

RICHARD: In the sense you describe, we are all *chantas*, including me, for according to the Bible there is a giant fool within the heart of each of us due to sin. We are prone to pride and duplicity. We all try to get our way through stealth now and then.

SEBA: OK. But, there is another, important and embarrassing sense in which the term resonates with Argentines and their culture, specifically, a lack of truthfulness in word and deed. A quick survey on Google points this out. A *chanta* is unreliable, deceitful, does not fulfill promises, and lacks credibility. A *chanta* is someone who "has little willingness to do something that requires effort or an obligation, especially work."

RICHARD: Go on...

SEBA: I believe that Argentines are quite aware of and even lament this national weakness. For example, think about a few excerpts from a popular song written about Argentina during a recent World Cup, "Somos de Aquí" [We belong here]: "our *chamuyo* (deceitful prattle) is our national industry", "if life deceives us, we cry: '¡falta envido!' (in Argentine *truco*: to raise the ante)" and "we are the pride and the spark of genius". Or, listen to this Argentine proverb: "He who created law, also created cheating".

RICHARD: Well, if I am honest, and even though I love and admire many aspects of Argentine culture, during the six years that I have lived here, I encountered a long list of people who promised to call but have not, promised to provide this or that but did not, promised to arrive or attend or go at a certain time and date but did not, or proposed this or that action, activity or resource but did not follow-up or follow-through -- sadly nearly all of these examples occurred within Christian contexts.

SEBA: That sounds like the phenomena I described, at least part of what it means to be a *chanta*. Keep in mind that, while many people are irresponsible or unclear and do not fulfill promises, often their intentions are not evil. In other words, they are not laughing behind your back or purposely taken advantage of you, though the worst *chantas* actually do. Sometimes, people tell you what you want to know or hear because they do not want to disappoint you. Perhaps they hope they can follow through later on.

RICHARD: All right. But, as long as we're being honest, there is another custom that I now wonder if it also falls under the rubric of duplicity and lack of transparency. I've found that it is challenging to get to know people here at a deep level. And, I wonder about the common way in which Argentines greet one another. For instance, when you say to me, "Hey, how are you? How are things going?" and I reply, "Fine! Fortunately, everything's alright". But, what does this exchange really mean? Is it simply a conventional courtesy or does it also obscure the truth? Because, perhaps in reality I am hurting deeply, but I reveal nothing. Or, perhaps I suffer from some great problem as yet unresolved, but I am not open. I wonder. What do you think?

SEBA: It could be. I really don't know and I need to think about it more. But, there are other aspects of the term, *chanta*, that I want you to know.

RICHARD: OK. This is helpful.

SEBA: While the song rightfully boasts of our national pride and resilience, it also testifies to cultural shame and duplicity. First, for many Argentines being a *chanta* is praiseworthy. Deception, cunning, and manipulation are extremely useful as Machiavellian virtues for getting what you want. This attitude is expressed in another phrase from the song. Even though some foreigners may characterize Argentines negatively as *chantas*, they nevertheless proudly retort: "because of the fury and the excitement, the pride and the heartache for being a damned Argentinean, one more [time], just like [for] you". There is also a line from a famous tango that says: "If you don't cry you won't be breastfed, and if you don't rob you're a jerk".

RICHARD: Wait a minute. Are you saying that in some way Argentine culture, itself, is *chanta*? Does the nation really deserve this negative assessment?

SEBA: Yes, sadly, I believe so. But, I have mixed feelings about the song and the term, *chanta*. As the song reflects there are reasons in our cultural history that explain why some people react as *chantas* in the face of difficult circumstances. For example, after events like the "Corralito", when we endured the financial struggle of 2001, Argentines demonstrated their resiliency in face of affliction. But, on the other hand, many Argentines, certainly not all of us, became increasingly suspicious and some people believe that the only way to avoid becoming victims of lies and traitors is to be "el más vivo", which means being more cunning or deceptive than others. In this sense you, as a foreigner, probably cannot truly understand that song or our pride and shame about being a *chanta*.

RICHARD: You're probably right. But, I lived several years in Central Europe after the fall of communism and many people had a similar attitude. They learned the hard way that the only way to survive was through manipulation and deceit. They even had sayings that reflect this outlook, for example: "The Soviets pretend to pay us and we pretend to work."

SEBA: Yes. That seems similar. But, there is another aspect of our culture that you should know. There is a tendency for some in our society to think of Gringos in an intolerant way.

There's a feeling that they look down their noses at the world and at us. The stereotype is that North Americans come to our country to "enlighten" or "save" us.

RICHARD: I understand, but....

SEBA: To be precise, if you were to highlight this negative aspect of our culture, you will receive a lot of antagonism. But, to be fair and honest such a reaction would fail to see the purpose of your message. Many people will only focus on the criticism. And, because you are North American, people will quickly reject what you have to say because they think that you speak from some kind of "superior" position. But, this attitude reveals a lot about Argentines too: a deep sense of their own low self-esteem and a tendency to fight back with arrogance and their own false sense of superiority and victimhood.

RICHARD: That's a very harsh self-assessment of your culture. But, of course, you know that my culture suffers from its own weaknesses, as well.

SEBA: All right. Tell me.

RICHARD: In short, North Americans often act as if they own the world and that they are the "saviors" of the human race. My wife and I often laugh about all the movies in which we are portrayed as the rescuers of humanity from all kinds of threats. I often tell her how fortunate she is to be married to a "Yankee"! But, it is often true that we meddle in other's internal affairs or that we believe we possess all the answers and know the best way to do everything. This is cultural pride, for sure.

SEBA: All that corresponds with the negative stereotype we have of your nation. However, you are a theologian, so tell me what the biblical worldview suggests about these cultural sins and idols.

RICHARD: Well, first, being a *chanta* ought not typify the church and Christians here or in any country, who claim to follow the "God of truth" (Isaiah 65:16): "If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth" (1 John 1:6). As Christians we should say and do what we really mean and what is true in love. I am reminded of the person described in Psalm 15. The writer asks: "Who shall sojourn in your tent? Who shall dwell on your holy hill?" (verse 1). The answers are quite revealing and serve as a refutation of all deceitfulness: "He who walks blamelessly and does what is right and speaks truth in his heart" (verse 2); "Who does not slander with his tongue and does no evil to his neighbor, nor takes up a reproach against his friend" (verse 3); and "Who swears to his own hurt and does not change" (verse 4b). So then, who is a *chanta*? It should not be you, an Argentine, nor me, a North American. And, certainly it should not be the person "who shall sojourn in your tent".

SEBA: Interesting. Go on....

RICHARD: OK. Second, as a foreigner I am not exempt from the Bible's critique, either my own culture or myself personally. For example, according to the biblical worldview, every culture and all peoples are subject to the Bible's assessment. Throughout the Bible, the social-religious-political-economic judgment of sin and idolatry occurs with reference to every culture and worldview. One day every individual and nation will give an account of his values and habits before the throne of God, for good and bad.

SEBA: Is there a name for this?

RICHARD: Sure, several, in fact. What I am speaking about is cultural apologetics, elenctics, or polemical theology. It is something the Bible does all the time.

SEBA: OK.

RICHARD: Just to finish, let me give you a quick example from my own experience. After several years as a missionary in Central Europe, I finally realized that North American Christians so tightly wrap the Bible with the U.S. flag or dollar that it is hard for us to distinguish democracy or capitalism from the Gospel. This healthy and humbling self-assessment raised for me some difficult questions: Does conversion necessarily imply economic prosperity? Should missions clone Westerners? Should converts look, behave, think, and spend like North Americans or Western Europeans?

SEBA: Perhaps this kind of personal and cultural self-assessment would be beneficial here in Argentina. I think it is important to distinguish between the positive and negative aspects of our culture with the Bible as our guide.

RICHARD: Yes. I agree.

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