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Journal of Consumer Culture 2012 12: 156

DOI: 10.1177/1469540512446876

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Comfort for the people and liberation for the housewife: Gender, consumption and refrigerators in Argentina (1930–60)

Inés Pérez

Universidad Nacional de Mar del Plata/Consejo Nacional de Investigaciones Científicas y Técnicas, Argentina

Abstract

The mass consumption of electric refrigerators in Argentina has been linked to several representations. On the one hand, it has occupied a central place in the rhetoric of 'welfare democratization' used by the Peronist government to present a 'new Argentina.' On the other hand, it took on a prominent role in the search for distinction by and within the growing middle class, and in the creation of social distance within the middle class. In both cases, the image of the housewife's 'liberation' from daily chores because of new appliances condensed the 'popularization of comfort', the success of the social model that fostered it and success of head of the household who could provide a better life for his family. The increase in refrigerator consumption changed the visibility of domestic work in a paradoxical way: as it became a frequent topic in several discursive spaces, it suggested that the housewife's work had been (or would be) replaced by new appliances. In this article, I examine the meanings ascribed to this appliance through its representation in 45 life narratives and the narratives' intertextual relationships with texts from the period. This analysis focuses on the ways in which the refrigerator became intertwined with the strategies of distinction used by those who could afford such a product. I also analyse the conditions that allowed the 'popularization' of refrigerators, as well as the discourses that made the product a 'must-have'.

Keywords

consumption, domestic work, gender, middle class, refrigerator

Corresponding author:

Inés Pérez, Universidad Nacional de Mar del Plata/Consejo Nacional de Investigaciones Científicas y Técnicas, La Pampa 834, Mar del Plata, provincia de Buenos Aires, Argentina (CP 7600)

Email: inesp18@yahoo.com

Introduction

The pictures shown in Figure 1 portray the celebration of a First Communion that took place circa 1963. The first image shows a common motif: the girl in a dress typical for the ceremony, surrounded by her uncles and her little cousin. The scene takes place in her aunt and uncle's dining room (housewife and salesman, respectively), especially furnished for the occasion. Behind them, the refrigerator stands as an element of the tableau, and not a minor one at that. The people portrayed are arranged around the appliance; the refrigerator is practically another member of the family. Nevertheless, its place, both physical and symbolic, is not unusual. Unlike the USA or Europe (Jackson and Moores, 1995; Nickles, 2002; Wajcman, 1994), in mid-20th-century Argentina, the refrigerator was often located in the dining room and ornamented with objects such as flowers (as in the photo above), doilies, family pictures and even small statuettes. If the refrigerator was designed to be in the kitchen, conceived as a means of storing food safely and reducing the housewife's workload, how did it end up in the dining room, at the centre of family life? What material and symbolic journeys explain the place it gained in this picture? What were the consequences of such journeys in relation to the visibility of housework?



Figure 1. Family photograph, c. 1963.
Reproduced courtesy of an interviewee.

In Argentina, the promotion of electrical appliance consumption gained momentum in printed media starting in the mid-1930s (Bontempo, 2006). However, characterized by deep regional differences, sales remained low until the 1950s and 1960s, when the level of national production increased. In 1936, refrigerators for domestic use became manufactured in a standard way in Argentina, as part of the industrialization process that grew in parallel to local demand (Belini, 2009). National production would reach important figures only later, in the mid-century, rising from 40,000 annual units in 1950 to 130,000 in 1955 and to 206,000 in 1960 (Dorfman, 1983). In 1947, only 3 percent of Argentinean homes had one of these appliances, a rate comparable to that of other latitudes; in 1948, only 2 percent of British homes had an electric refrigerator (Belini, 2009: 117). By 1960, this reached 39.25 percent of Argentinean homes. According to the Consejo Técnico de Inversiones (1970), by 1969, 80 percent of wired homes in Argentina had an electric refrigerator. However, by 1960 (just three years before the photographs above were taken), only 42 percent of homes in the province of Buenos Aires had this type of appliance (Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Censos, 1960a).

In Argentina, the rise in the consumption of electric refrigerators and other domestic appliances mirrored the observed sales increases of such products in other countries. As in post-war Europe and other Latin American countries, the 'American way of life' became a significant element in the construction of an ideal of domesticity, one where consumption centred on the home and family occupied a preeminent place (De Grazia, 2005; Moreno, 2003; Scrivano, 2005). Although the images used to advertise these appliances were clearly shaped by the American model, their widespread use gave rise to several local appropriations. The increase in refrigerator and other home appliance sales was founded on diverse representations, among which two were essential. First, there was the promise of comfort in the domestic environment and, thus, a liberation of the housewife. Second, there was an aesthetic of the 'popular' home that would differentiate from the canons of good taste, set by the upper classes (an instance of such an aesthetic is the photograph in Figure 1).

In the 1930s, different 'marvels' were advertised to transform the home into a luxurious, technological place, whereas in the decades that followed, these articles were presented as part of the popularization of comfort. The years of 'welfare democratization' (Torre and Pastoriza, 2002) were also characterized by an important growth of the middle class and the search for new signs of distinction, both by those who had always identified with the middle class and by those 'newly arrived' (Adamovsky, 2009). However, the domestication process (Silverstone, 1996)¹ of the new objects was based on the appeal to a female audience and thus on a new public visibility of the housewife as consumer (Elena, 2006; Milanese, 2006). In what ways did the image of well-being change expectations related to consumerism and domestic work? What place did domestic appliances have in the image of 'comfort for the people' and in the strategies of distinction of the growing middle class? How did questions of gender and class intertwine with these images?

The formation of markets of mass consumption is a central element in understanding the social transformations of the 20th century. In the case of Latin America, consumerism provided a path to citizenship and a westernized lifestyle, which permitted the creation of new identities, new signs of distinction and a reorganization of social categories.² In the study of consumerism (which includes the acts of purchasing, using, fixing and discarding), Campbell (1995) has outlined differences between the design and use of appliances; some of those differences may be explained by gender inequalities (Cockburn and Fürs-Dilic, 1994; Horowitz and Mohun, 1998; Martinez and Ames, 1997). The case analysed here also demands that the tension between designs and uses in different spatial and temporal contexts be considered. The first electric refrigerators were designed decades before their sales became widespread in Argentina (and in Latin America in general). What meanings, then, were ascribed to these goods in this context? What place did they occupy in the creation of social distance?

In this article, I approach these questions through representations outlined in 45 life narratives. I carried out 70 interviews of 45 subjects (29 women and 16 men). Mapping the heterogeneity of experiences of home modernization within a limited sphere was the principle used in participant selection. All interviewees resided in Mar del Plata³ during the period under analysis. Towards the mid-20th-century, this city became the summer Mecca of the middle class (Torre and Pastoriza, 1999). The building of summer *chalets* equipped with the most modern technological innovations reproduced everyday comfort in the vacation context and brought 'modern' ways of living to Mar del Plata's population. For the provincial middle class, proximity to the *porteño*⁴ lifestyle was in itself a sign of status.

I sought to include subjects of different ages (the oldest born in 1918 and the youngest in 1965) with the purpose of tracing generational differences in the experience of home modernization. I also included subjects of different national origins, such as Italians, Belgians, but also people from other Argentinean regions, e.g. the province of Santiago del Estero, and other areas of Buenos Aires province who settled in Mar del Plata before the 1960s, and natives of Mar del Plata (also, in most cases, children of immigrants). I situate these representations in the context of other discourses from the period, looking for intertextual relationships between them. I worked with a corpus of several, widely circulated magazines from this period, focusing on electric refrigerator advertisements. I included magazines aimed at a general readership (*Mundo Peronista*, *Rico Tipo*), a female readership (*Para ti*, *El Hogar*), and a male readership (*Hobby*, *Mecánica Popular*). I also included *Casas y jardines*, one of the most important home decorating magazines in the country, in the corpus studied.

In the two sections that follow, I first address the conditions that made the expansion of electric refrigerator sales in Argentina possible, examining the discourses that turned this item into a 'must-have'. In the second section, I analyse the meanings attributed to this appliance and how it became associated with the strategies of distinction employed by those who could afford a refrigerator.

'Democratization' of comfort

More and more Argentine families are purchasing refrigerators and washing machines. Housewives are being freed from heavy household chores, since these and other mechanical gadgets make these tasks ever more bearable and pleasant. Food is better preserved, and, as a result, the Argentine working family saves money and keeps healthy. Some may still think that these advances are not related to the socio-political management of the country by the government, and that these are simply gifts that technology bestows on man in these times. We should ask them how many peoples in the world, with the exception of the United States and just a few European nations, truly have these gifts of technology. The comfort and advantages that technology offers are enjoyed there by the usual privileged, for these peoples are not as lucky as our country in terms of a fair distribution of wealth. Argentina is already a modern nation with all the advantages technology offers and these advantages have reached the poorest social strata of the country thanks to the genius of a president who is an example to the world and the pride of all Argentines. (*Mundo Peronista*, 1955)

This text was published in 1955 in a popular magazine of the period; it is part of the discourse that presented the Peronist government as the agent behind welfare democratization. In the passage above, refrigerators and washing machines embody a promise of comfort for the people and liberation for housewives. Home appliances and the figure of the housewife gained a new, central place in public consciousness, not only in Argentina but also in many other places around the world in the second half of the 20th century. The model of the modern home that emerged post-Second World War was pegged to middle-class American consumer standards, in which the kitchen was central (De Grazia, 2005; Lawrence-Zúñiga, 2004). The preeminent place occupied by such products, along with the model of the consumer housewife, acquired some singularities locally. In Argentina, the dichotomy that introduced domesticity as a topic in the public debate was an opposition contrasting the country of the usual, 'happy few' with a new Argentina, where everybody was (or could be, depending on their effort) 'well-to-do':

In the past, nobody even dreamed of having their own refrigerator, their vacuum cleaner and other appliances that make home life easier: they were privileges of the well-to-do. Nowadays, we are all well-to-do depending on our effort, which is acknowledged by Perón, and we all want those things, as we want to build our own house. (*Mundo Peronista*, 1953)

The 'democratization' of home appliances, especially refrigerators, implied better access to goods previously associated with the 'well-to-do'. Access to such goods was driven mostly by the growth of real salaries and the decrease of expenditures in housing, food, and clothing in working and middle-class homes' budgets

(Aroskind, 2003; Belini, 2009; Rapoport, 2003).⁵ The local production of these goods first began in the 1930s, in the context of an economic crisis during which the National State took a more prominent place in the economy by protecting local industry. According to Claudio Belini (2009), the substitution of imported refrigerators with locally made appliances only lasted a short period of time. A better explanation for the local industry's growth can be found in the parallel increase of internal demand that characterized the following decades. The demand increase for these and other durables would emerge in the late 1940s, when the purchasing power of the middle and working classes increased, enabling a diversification of consumption that characterized the Peronist and the following 'desarrollistas' governments (Marshall, 1981; Rapoport, 2003).

However, in the 1950s, the 'need' for a refrigerator at home was still considered debatable. In fact, during the first years of the Peronist government, industrial policies did not particularly favour refrigerator production. Between 1946 and 1949, loans to the refrigerator industry were insignificant, and the competition with imported goods was strong (Belini, 2009: 126). In July 1951 the Banco Central qualified refrigerator production as 'expendable', which triggered a series of actions by businessmen to eliminate the restrictions this label imposed on the industry (Belini, 2009: 126). Lobbying by the sector's businessmen eventually led to the refrigerator industry being declared a 'national interest' in 1954.

Though it had not been a preferred beneficiary of Banco Industrial credit until the same year, the local production of home appliances was favoured thanks to several trade restrictions during the Peronist government, the granting of permission to import parts; and preferential exchange rates for the purchase of machinery. The industry was finally considered essential because refrigerator cost-reduction was deemed necessary in 1954. Lowering the cost of refrigerators would 'make possible their acquisition by a broader section of the population' (Belini, 2009: 130).

The priority given to domestic comfort and the modernization of the home can also be traced back to important public policies of the period, destined to extend water, electricity and gas to a substantially greater percentage of homes in the country. Thus, between 1946 and 1953, the consumption of electricity increased by 45 percent. Residential consumption of electric energy continued to grow steadily between 1950 and 1980, doubling every 10 years (Instituto Nacional de Estadísticas y Censos, 1981–82). Increased consumption of electricity may be explained, at least partly, by the relative decrease of its price in relation to the general cost of living index. From 1943 to 1957, the cost of electricity increased by 247 percent, whereas the cost of living in the same period increased by 956.1 percent (Dirección Nacional de Estadística y Censos, 1957). By 1960, almost 78 percent of homes in the province of Buenos Aires had electric energy, a percentage higher than the total rate for the country (69%) (Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Censos, 1960b). Mar del Plata had earlier access to electrical energy; by 1960, 93% of its homes had this amenity (Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Censos, 1960b). Data from

the 1960s and 1970s show a noticeable increase in the consumption of electricity in this city: between 1965 and 1980, home consumption of electric energy tripled.⁶

It is interesting to note that the arguments developed by industrialists to ask for government protection of refrigerator production were the same ones later used by the government to build an image of welfare democratization, in which refrigerators and the liberation of the housewives occupied a prominent place. In the memorial addressed to Minister Gómez Morales in September of 1951, for example, we find the same ideas that would later be revisited in government discourses and also in the previously quoted articles published in *Mundo Peronista*. It was said, for example, that:

The equipment of a house, be it humble or sumptuous, is not considered complete if the electric refrigerator and the washing machine are missing, ... refrigerators allowed the preservation of food 'saving the significant cost of those leftovers that used to be thrown in the garbage can'. (Belini, 2009: 126–7)

The coincidence of reasons brandished both in industrialists' discourses and in the image of welfare democratization painted in the article published in *Mundo Peronista* is especially significant because of the increasing weight attributed to the figure of the housewife in governmental discourse during the inflationary crises of 1949 and 1952. In this sense, it has been noted that, in moments of economic hardship, housewives have often been called on by government to act as price control agents. For instance, housewives were urged to patronize only honest merchants, who sold their wares at fair prices (Elena, 2006; Milanesio, 2006). The incitement to save money was tinged by moral overtones, which embodied the cornerstone of the housewife ideal since the beginning of the century (Cepeda, 2007; Liernur, 1997; Nari, 2004). This ideal would be updated in the Peronist discourse as part of a broader appeal to consume national products.

Housewives were called on to make wiser use of their money by buying more rationally. The production and purchase of a refrigerator were promoted in the same terms. An electric refrigerator would allow housewives to save not only time but especially money 'because they could purchase food for several days in advance, which also brought about the economic advantage of avoiding the more expensive purchase of food in small amounts' (Belini, 2009: 127). The 'liberation of the housewife' must be read here in relation to the imperative of money saving and rational spending. In Ruth Schwartz Cowan's words (1983), it meant 'more work for mother': the work of finding the best prices, buying better and making healthier meals. These images would last long after the Peronist government violently ended, in the narratives of those who acquired a refrigerator during 'welfare democratization'. How were these images viewed by consumers? How did these images condition the ways in which people used refrigerators? How were these ways used to create new social distances?

Refrigerators for the people

Electric home appliances began to appear in the local market as one of the technological novelties that simplified housework in the mid-1930s. Between 1934 and 1936, advertisements for such products were still rare. Since then, however, they have gradually gained more space in widely read magazines, peaking during the 1950s and 1960s. The first images of such goods represented an aspect of a lifestyle marked by luxury and comfort. As the text accompanying Figure 2 indicates, both couples portrayed enjoy refreshments after a night out at the theatre (or the dance hall). They may do so in the kitchen, still in formal dress, thanks to modern appliances run by electricity, which, as a result, keep the room clean and comfortable. The maid in the background prepares these refreshments: her figure, as does the models' clothing in the scene, plays a key role in the presentation of these goods as a sign of prestige.

Mechanic-electric equipment in today's architecture has simplified the work of the housewife. The electric kitchen that we see here, equipped with modern elements,



Figure 2. From *Casas y jardines*, January–February 1934.

shows how, in formal dress, after a night out at the ball or the theatre, refreshments may be prepared and enjoyed in a clean, comfortable room.

Even though Figure 2 was not strictly an advertisement, it was repeatedly published in *Casas y jardines* in 1934; it is one of the early images of the domestic electric refrigerator in the national press (Liernur and Silvestri, 1993; Rocchi, 2003). The electric refrigerator was essential to the modern kitchen, based on the aesthetics and equipment of the suburban American kitchen. References to the USA were indeed very frequent, both in relation to architectural models and to new objects and technologies incorporated into the home. As refrigerators were made in the country for the first time, the rich and 'well-to-do' began to consider the mechanized home an ideal one.

By the 1960s the refrigerator was still a sign of status, but not for the same people, and not in the same ways.⁷ As the electric refrigerator turned into a product of mass consumption – that is, only after local production gained momentum (as mentioned above, between 1947 and 1960, the percentage of households owning one increased from 3 percent to almost 40 percent), it was still used as a status symbol, albeit only by those who had just become able to afford one. The refrigerator was used to emphasize distance from those who still used an icebox. Social and regional differences played a key role in these uses. Money (a smaller amount than in the 1930s, but still considerable)⁸ was not the only requirement for having a refrigerator. As the following excerpt stresses, by the mid-20th century, there was still no electricity in many urban areas of the country. As in the case of Segunda, who moved from Tucumán to Mar del Plata in the mid-1950s, migration was often triggered by the search for such comforts.

Interviewer: How did the house change with migration?

Segunda: [It changed] completely, because we didn't have anything back there [in Tucumán]. There was no running water, no gas, no electricity... We were in a nice place near the Station in Tucumán, but we didn't have comfort, we didn't have anything. Once we saw this [Mar del Plata], we came right away.⁹

Time lags in households' access to electricity and refrigerators (as to other goods and services) gave rise to deep regional differences. While in 1960, slightly over 42 percent of homes in the province of Buenos Aires had such an appliance, only 13 percent of homes in the province of Catamarca had one (Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Censos, 1960b). These differences underscore deep inequalities in the domestic work of women from different regions and social classes. Indeed, an important source of marked inequality in domestic work came from differential supplies of urban services to homes. While the comfortable home and the housewife were key figures in the image of welfare democratization, they were also central elements in the construction of new inequalities such as regional and class inequalities (the middle classes benefited most from public policies in relation to

both housing and its equipment), as well as gender inequalities, inasmuch as the latter reinforced the sexual division of labour.

The acquisition of new goods and services also offered new symbols of distinction for newly middle-class and working-class homes, as Victoria illustrates below:

And precisely with the arrangement of the house [which had changed in the new house they had bought] came the appliances, too. Because in the house we used to rent we had an icebox. Every day we had to bring the chunk of ice wrapped in burlap to put in this icebox. In the new house, instead, we got an electric refrigerator [...]. My dad bought that house in an auction. Something that struck me, because we lived humbly, was that we had only a radio in that house we used to rent, and that struck me because I went with my dad to see the house, and they let us in, and the appliances they had caught my attention. I was eight or nine and I had never seen so many things [...] one of the things that caught my attention the most was the blender. Because they had a blender, a record player, and so many appliances. They were losing their house, while we, who had nothing, were buying their house.¹⁰

Victoria, the daughter of a railway worker born in Mar del Plata in 1951, remembers her bewilderment when she saw the appliances other people had for the first time. Her 'not having' is framed, however, in the narrative of her family's acquisition of their very own house, one lost by the former occupants, who had had a blender, a record player and other appliances of note. In contrast to the house, which remained the central element of a family's assets, between the late 1950s and the early 1960s, appliances could be seen as signs of well-being but could also be viewed as signs of unnecessary sumptuousness and lack of both restraint and thrift. However, the refrigerator was not included among luxury appliances: it was part, indeed, of Victoria's narrative on social promotion through access to a proper home. In her recounting of the past, her family is contrasted to those who lost their home. If her family could buy their own house, leaving the ice box and the drudgeries it implied behind, it was because they could distinguish the essential from the superfluous: the house and refrigerator from the blender and record player. While in the 1930s the refrigerator was presented as part of a luxurious life, by the 1960s, it was considered essential to a family's assets. Nevertheless, for the newly arrived middle-class way of life, it was also a status symbol that represented wise spending and respectable family values. Thus, the electric refrigerator increased not only the comfort within the house but also the respectability of the family that dwelled in it.

In the narratives of older male and female migrants from rural areas, the refrigerator is a symbol of well-being that transcended its potential functions. This perspective is that of Antonio's. Antonio was born in 1925 in a small Italian town and moved to Argentina (and then to Mar del Plata) in 1950 to work in a series of somewhat unstable jobs. Antonio speaks of the refrigerator as a symbol of goals accomplished through hard work. Following a recurring association in ads from the period and in the Peronist discourse analysed above,

the refrigerator was synonymous with food and, thus, essential needs. This appliance represented a qualitative leap in the daily life of men and women of similar age and social background to Antonio: abundant, quality food of higher complexity in its preparation was unthinkable without a refrigerator to keep it fresh efficiently. It should be noted that the performance of the icebox was markedly inferior to that of the electric refrigerator. In contrast, other appliances are presented as 'comfort items' for the housewife and not as work tools. 'It was her thing' is the expression Antonio uses when asked about other appliances (the beater, the blender):

Antonio: And hard work, hard work. You who are so young . . . Some will say it was easier then, but we had to break our backs. We had to break our backs. But the only thing I did not do without was the refrigerator. As you can see it now, I've always had it. It was sacred. But when it came to other luxuries, nothing. The truth is, we held back from almost everything. Food and clothing, of course, but everything else, entertainment, travelling, forget it, nothing at all. [. . .]

Interviewer: And what about other appliances like the electric beater, the blender . . . ?

Antonio: Yes, always. When they were out in the market, my wife always . . . , it was her thing, yes, she has everything, we had everything. This thing, when she wanted it, she had it. No arguing about it. Comforts like that, those things, we always had them. We had no luxuries, but we always had those things.¹¹

Interviewer: And with the new refrigerator, how did it [housework] change?

Blanca: It was so big and pretty and modern, the refrigerator he bought me . . .¹²

In the previous excerpt and other interviews, the refrigerator appears as an acquisition whose aesthetic (rather than functional) qualities stand out. In the fragment quoted above, this quality is especially significant because of the context in which this description appears: it is given as a pertinent answer to the question of changes in housework. In effect, throughout the period under analysis, marketing campaigns presented home appliances as comfort goods rather than work goods. Thus campaigns promoting the stylish quality of home appliances suggested that domestic work is not actually 'work', as the total automation of house chores frees up a significant amount of time (Forty, 1986). The image of 'domestic servants' occurs repeatedly in advertisements promoting these products. Appliances are presented as substitutes for human work and as more efficient and reliable ones at that. The housewife, once liberated from her chores, could devote more time to her family. However, even though other 'labour-saving' appliances were presented by stressing their aesthetic qualities, only the refrigerator achieved a place in dining rooms and family photographs such as the ones seen in Figure 1.

At first, buying a washing machine was like saying: [...] 'if she's at home all day long, what does she need a washing machine for if she doesn't have anything to do?'¹³

Elena was born in 1953. In the excerpt above, she remembers her childhood, spent in a middle-class neighbourhood in Mar del Plata. As we can see from her comment, in the late 1950s and early 1960s, washing machines were viewed by many women as being for lazy housewives. As seen before with blenders and beaters, many domestic appliances had an ambiguous status within the home: they were identified as unnecessary luxuries, as frivolous ways of spending money, or simply as 'womanly stuff'. In fact, the idea that they 'saved' labour (whether they actually did it or not at the time) was probably very disturbing for many housewives. In contrast to most other appliances, the refrigerator offered other possible representations. On one hand, it allowed working-class and newly middle-class husbands to perform their roles as breadwinners, key to their social promotion. On the other hand, it allowed working-class and newly middle-class housewives to perform their roles as family caretakers and as satisfied and loving wives who could spend money wisely, further contributing to their family's social promotion and well-being. Thus, it made sense for working-class and newly middle-class men and women to show the refrigerator off to visitors by placing it in plain view; stressing its qualities as an aesthetic object by decorating it; or even by taking pictures with it as though it were a member of the family.

As stated in different interviews, the purchase of any new appliance prompted numerous visits (in Victoria's words, 'everyone came to see what you'd bought'¹⁴). However, this was not the only time visitors were made to see newly purchased goods. Refrigerators were, therefore, placed and decorated in special ways. The refrigerator was often placed in the dining room. While the kitchen was also a place for socializing, the dining room, when money allowed, was most likely the most impeccable room in the house. The refrigerator's place in the dining room underscored its status as an object to be displayed along strict aesthetical rules. In fact, in working-class or newly middle-class homes, the refrigerator was usually covered in doilies and ornamented with different objects, regardless of whether it was placed in the dining room or in the kitchen. This recalls what Baudrillard (1999: 21) identified as a strategy of redundancy: 'the theatrical and baroque wrapping of domestic property . . . , not only to possess, but also to underscore twice, three times, what one possesses'.

This practice was not entirely original. In fact, it was influenced by available images. In April 1955, for instance, the decorative use of the refrigerator illustrated words that presented it as an achievement of social justice (see Figure 3):¹⁵ the refrigerator in the dining room, decorated in this case with a small bust of Eva Perón, was the visual representation of 'comfort for the people' and the liberation of the housewife. These goals were achieved thanks to the Justicialista government. The image was so strong that, decades later, it was recovered by a well-known artist as an icon of welfare democratization identified with Peronism.¹⁶

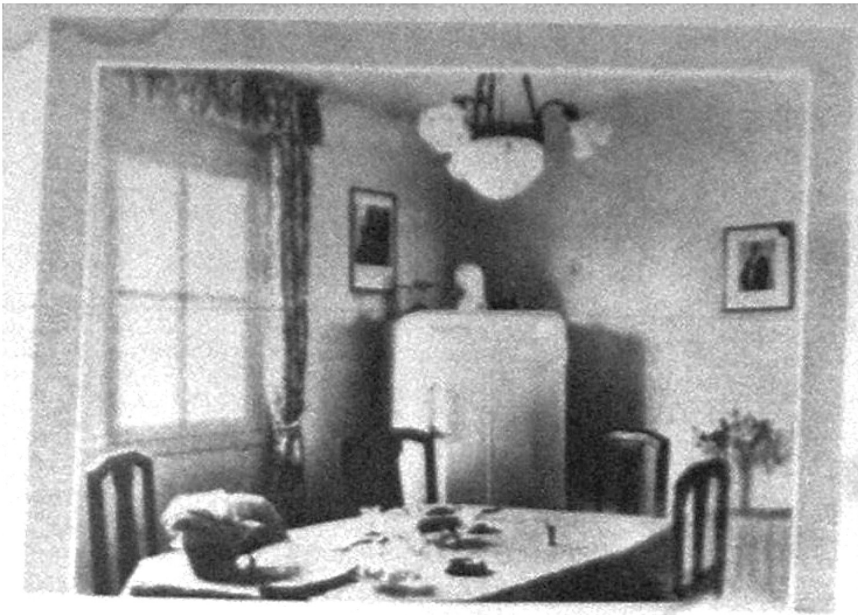


Figure 3. *Mundo Peronista*, 1 April 1955.

Those who had earlier access to refrigerators (at the same time as the usual ‘happy few’) did not need to brag about the acquisition. Family respectability was also expressed (and successfully achieved) in modern ways of living, but homes of the happy few were characterized by aesthetic criteria closer to those exemplified in *Casas y jardines* or *Claudia*, magazines aimed at (though not exclusively read by) a readership with a high purchasing power. In the 1950s and 1960s, the pages of these magazines showed a growing tendency towards an aesthetic of simpler and cleaner lines, in which doily- and statuette-laden appliances would have been incongruous. In fact, many articles recommended appliances be hidden, or at least dissimulated. The model of domesticity was the same, but the aesthetic criteria with which it was adopted were not necessarily identical.

However, despite their differences, the ways of living of both those who had earlier access and the newly arrived shared a common ground. The model of domesticity – that is, the family ideal but also other key features such as home-centred consumerism aimed at achieving comfort and the image of the housewife’s liberation – was the same. Moreover, both in older and newer middle-class homes (and in working-class ones that identified with this model of domesticity), family respectability depended on the housewife’s ability to present a neat and tidy home to any potential visitor, as the extracts below from Victoria and Elena illustrate:

Notice to what extent these people did not appreciate what they had. The bedroom floor was a parquet floor; it was made out of wood, which is now a relic; it is still there,

but there was an area of the parquet floor that was burnt, with stains of wine bottles... That is, notice to what extent they did not appreciate at all that which meant the world to us, that house [...] You had to scrub the parquet floor first with a thick pad of steel wool, everything was done manually, of course, I remember you had to throw a pad of steel wool under your foot and then you kept on scrubbing in the direction of the wood's grain. The wooden planks were arranged in a herringbone pattern, first a plank in one direction, then in the other. After that, an incredible amount of... grit would come out. You swept it, you cleaned it, and then you waxed the floor. The next day, you waxed the floor again, and then when it was finally dry, you wiped it with a dry cloth, because the buffer came only much later. That was also another step forward. [...] From three, half past three in the afternoon, to five thirty or six was the time to visit. The visit wasn't announced because there were no phones, or there were very few. That means that the visitor would show unexpectedly, something that's not usual anymore. 'Are you going to be home, I'll call you.' Back then you went because you knew the housewife would be home. Who would go out, unless you had to go to the doctor? [...] I remember once an aunt came by. My mom nodded to me and I tidied the bathroom up from behind my aunt; I put some towels, I don't know... Because it was a matter of what would people say [...] That details were very carefully attended because it [to get caught in an untidy home] was a failure to the woman, wasn't it?¹⁷

The house always had to be... because if visitors came by, if someone came by, please...¹⁸

The visit was a key moment to show off a well-cared-for home, properly equipped, decorated and cleaned. The failure to do so was, as Victoria says, a woman's failure. Though the exhibition of domestic appliances, and of the refrigerator especially, was a way of achieving family respectability, the ways in which the house was used and taken care of were also central to the confirmation of status and social identity. House chores, and the domestic appliances that made them easier, acquired, in this sense, a new relevance. Knowing how to take care of a parquet floor was also a way of showing you were different from people who had burns and wine bottle stains on theirs. Aside from the fact that new goods were a sign of status (the parquet floor in the first place, then the floor buffer), what really endowed one with prestige was a home that was well taken care of. Distinction stemmed not only (perhaps not even mainly) from the appliances or goods possessed but also from the way household chores were performed.

At the same time as appliances were wrapped in an image of comfort, the discourses that promoted their consumption gave new visibility to the housewife and housework. Though it was not obvious that appliances reduced time spent on household chores – mainly because housework expanded to fill all the time available (Schwartz Cowan, 1983) – the housewife, aided by her 'electric domestic servants', could now always appear rested, beautiful and elegant. This appearance could in turn embody the image of her husband's social success and guarantee,

thanks to the 'liberation' gained with her new-found free time, a greater well-being for her family. Having home appliances, and, above all, knowing how to do domestic work, represented the achievement of family respectability in the middle-class model of domesticity. The refrigerator gained a special place among appliances. On one hand, its meaning was less ambiguous than other 'labour-saving' devices. On the other hand, it condensed the images of abundance, a breadwinning husband and a homemaking (and thrifty) housewife into one entity. In this way, a transformation that began during Peronism had a lasting effect on everyday life and in the formation of a middle-class identity that transcended the political and economic cleavages of the times that followed.

Conclusion

In the middle decades of the 20th century, the electric refrigerator became a 'necessary' consumer article in the Argentine home. From its status as a luxury product that only sectors with greater purchasing power could acquire, it turned into an article widely desired by a growing middle class. Its path from luxury to necessity, however, was not free of obstacles. On the one hand, the expansion of the refrigeration industry coincided with only indirect state support until the last years of the Peronist government. On the other hand, in spite of the significant public policies regarding the extension of electric energy networks, a high percentage of houses in the country still lacked this service towards the end of the period analysed here. That families could afford this appliance at different times was a consequence of very deep social and regional inequalities.

Beyond these inequalities, among those who could afford this good, its uses were diverse. The refrigerator as decorative object can be interpreted, from the place it eventually acquires, as a sign of status and a marker of the social distance sought from those who, though economically close, were yet unable to purchase one. Unlike other domestic appliances that could be considered symbols of frivolous spending, the refrigerator was a necessary article, synonymous with family well-being. This use may also be interpreted as an appeal to a 'popular' aesthetic, distant from the decoration criteria exhibited in magazines aimed at a readership of higher purchasing power and more refined tastes.

Electric refrigerators changed the fabric of the quotidian. With them, the material conditions for the preservation of food improved substantially, opening up new ways of purchasing and preparing meals. However, the changes were not just material. Refrigerators and other domestic appliances occupied a relevant place both in the image of the popularization of comfort and in the creation of social distance by and within a growing middle class. Domestic comfort and the housewife's liberation were central ideas both in the image of welfare democratization (promoted from 'above') and in the adoption and appropriation of a middle-class model of domesticity (from 'below'). In both, gender stereotypes and a new visibility of domestic work played a key role: though the domestic woman was the beneficiary of this new comfort, her 'liberation' from household chores represented

the manifestation of both her husband and the state's success. The expansion in the consumption of refrigerators changed the visibility of domestic work in a paradoxical way: at the same time that it became a frequent topic in several discursive places, it suggested that the housewife's work had been – or would be – replaced by new machines. Nevertheless, for many of the interviewees, the knowledge that this kind of work implied was irreplaceable: in this knowledge resided the respectability of the housewife and her family. Domestic work and home appliances would become key elements in the construction of a middle-class identity.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to the anonymous *Journal of Consumer Culture* reviewers for their accurate comments on a first version of this text.

Notes

1. For criticisms of the notion of 'domestication,' see Hand and Shove (2007).
2. For Argentina, consumption is an issue that has only recently earned a place in historic studies (see Eduardo Elena (2006); Valeria Manzano (2009); Natalia Milanese (2006); Marcela Nari and María del Carmen Feijóo (1996); Fernando Rocchi (1994, 2006)).
3. Mar del Plata is a tourist city in the coast of the Atlantic Ocean, in the South East of the Province of Buenos Aires. It is one of the major fishing ports and the biggest seaside beach resort in Argentina. With a population of 614,350 as per the 2010 Census, it is the seventh largest city in Argentina.
4. *Porteños* are people who live in the city of Buenos Aires.
5. As Adriana Marshall (1981) has shown, it was not until the period between 1963 and 1969 that workers had access to some of the durable goods that had already been on the market for a few years (refrigerators, TV sets). An increase in the participation of workers in the market of traditional goods was registered towards 1974–75.
6. See the *Anuarios Estadísticos* of the Municipalidad de General Pueyrredón for the years 1974–78, and 1976–80.
7. The placement of the TV set has also been analysed in these terms (Leal, 1990; Morley, 2002; Pérez, 2009).
8. In September 1964, for instance, a Marshall refrigerator was sold in monthly payments of \$1109: working 40 hours a week, an electrician had to pay 11 percent of his salary to buy one (Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Censos, 1964).
9. Interview with Segunda, January 2007.
10. Interview with Victoria, September 2009. Victoria's father worked later as an independent salesman. Her mother, at the time, opened a bakery.
11. Interview with Antonio, July 2009.
12. Interview with Blanca, August 2008. Blanca was the wife of a construction worker, who was born in a small town of the province of Buenos Aires in 1922 and moved to Mar del Plata in 1953.
13. Interview with Elena, August, 2008.
14. Interview with Victoria, September 2009.
15. In Figure 3, the dining table (which could also be in the kitchen), the lamp, the size of the window and the pictures in the walls allow one to identify this space as a dining room.

16. See the picture by Daniel Santoro, *Heladera Siam Di Tella, argentina, noble y buena* (2010).
17. Interview with Victoria, September 2009. Victoria's father later worked as an independent salesman. Her mother, at that time, opened a bakery.
18. Interview with Elena, August, 2008.

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Inés Pérez has a PhD in Social Sciences and Humanities. She currently works as a postdoctoral CONICET scholar and teaches at the Universidad Nacional de Mar del Plata (UNMDP), Argentina. She has published different articles in scientific journals and book chapters. Her forthcoming book, *El hogar tecnificado: Familias, género y vida cotidiana en Mar del Plata 1940–1970*, addresses the process of home mechanization in Argentina and analyses its relations to changes in gender and family life. Her current research is on domestic workers in Argentina in the second half of the 20th century.