Gender & History ISSN 0953-5233
Inés Pérez, 'Masculine Ways of Being at Home: Hobbies, Do-It-Yourself and Home Improvement in Argentina (1940–70)', in Raffaella Sarti (ed.), *Men at Home*, Special Issue of Gender & History, Vol.27 No.3 November 2015, pp. 812–827.

Masculine Ways of Being at Home: Hobbies, Do-It-Yourself and Home Improvement in Argentina (1940–70)

Inés Pérez

Masculinity and domesticity are often thought of as notions in tension. In Argentina, during the central decades of the twentieth century, they were mingled in a model of domesticity identified with the middle class, sustained in a 'democratisation' of well-being, home ownership and free time. Domestic masculinities relied on the inclusion of new technologies and activities within the home, related to hobbies, do-it-yourself and home improvement projects, which were regarded as signs of family respectability. The domestic space was not only the place where technical knowledge and manual work could be put into practice; the home was also the object targeted by these projects in men's free time.

The first Peronist administrations were characterised by a substantial improvement in middle- and working-class standards of living, driven both by the extension of social rights – particularly labour rights – a strong state involvement in areas such as housing, and an industrialisation model supported by the increasing consumption of the middle and working classes. Despite the controversies generated by Peronism and the conflicts that characterised Argentine political life in the following decades, economic policies developed after the overthrow of Peron in 1955 maintained these trends. Although everyday life was marked by inflation and economic instability, scholars have shown that these policies were actually accompanied by a sustained economic growth. There was also a progressive stratification of the middle and working classes. These developments were only interrupted by the military government initiated in 1976, which prompted the adoption of a neoliberal economic model, that further increased social inequality.[1]

Recently, researchers have pointed out that the improvement in the standard of living experienced by the working class in the mid-twentieth century also led to the crystallisation of middle-class identity as a response to the anxieties generated by the loss of their privileges. Masculinities were also significantly transformed in this period by the possibility of displaying domestic masculinities in public, and by the emergence of a model of paternity that gave greater weight to affection and rather less to authority.[2] In this context, domestic life gained significance in the construction of class identities and the quest for social distinction. The masculine ways of being at home analysed

© 2015 John Wiley & Sons Ltd, 9600 Garsington Road, Oxford OX4 2DQ, UK and 350 Main Street, Malden, MA 02148, USA.

14680424, 2015, 3, Downloaded from https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/1468-0424.12164 by CONICET Consejo Nacional de Investigaciones, Wiley Online Library on [06/12/2022]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

in this article promised to modernise the home and were part of a middle-class model of domesticity with which different social sectors could identify. However, the diverse appropriations of this model expressed increasing social tensions between men from different social sectors. Moreover, domestic masculinities created conflicts that took different forms in middle-class and working-class households.

Generally speaking, both consumption and domesticity have received little attention in Latin American history, particularly in Argentinean historiography.[3] This article seeks to make a contribution to this field. On the basis of forty-five life stories, and establishing a counterpoint through the representations that can be traced in popular magazines from the period, I analyse the objects, tasks and spaces considered 'masculine' within the domestic space, paying particular attention to the differences in the meanings men and women from different social classes ascribed to them.

For this research, I conducted seventy interviews with forty-five interviewees (twenty-nine women and sixteen men).[4] The interviewees were born between 1918 and 1965. They came from different places (including Italy, Belgium and northern Argentina), but most of them had lived in Mar del Plata at least since the end of the 1950s. They all self-identified as middle class, but their socio-occupational trajectories were diverse. Most of the women interviewed did not participate in the labour market after getting married, although this was less significant among the younger interviewees. Most of the men interviewed worked in the building industry but in very different positions, such as plumbers, electricians or master builders. I also interviewed professionals, traders, drivers and others. Often, wives took part in their husbands' business, but this work was perceived as 'help' and not 'real work'; in fact, most women self-identified as 'housewives'.

In addition, I base my analysis in popular magazines of the period, dedicated to the popularisation of technical knowledge, hobbies and home repair projects. I centred my study on the magazines *Mecánica Popular* and *Hobby*.[5] *Mecánica Popular* is a translation of *Popular Mechanics*, an American magazine that disseminated practical mechanical and scientific knowledge. It also published do-it-yourself and crafts projects. The Spanish translation was first published in Mexico in 1947, and soon arrived in Argentina. *Hobby* was first published in Buenos Aires in 1936, presented as a magazine for small home workshops and industrial training.

Despite their similarities, *Hobbies* and *Mecánica Popular* addressed relatively different audiences. *Mecánica Popular* was an expensive magazine, printed on high-quality paper, with many images that reminded the readers of the American middle-class way of life. *Hobby*, by contrast, had fewer illustrations, was printed on cheaper paper, and was cheaper to buy. Nevertheless, *Hobby* made an effort to appeal both to working- and middle-class readers, illustrating the articles with images of white-collar workers showing their manual skills, and using a technical language with which manual and blue-collar workers felt comfortable. Both magazines circulated among wider audiences than those to which they initially appealed. Readers shared articles with one another, and kept old issues of these magazines to consult whenever they had a practical problem to solve. *Mecánica Popular*, for example, became a collectible object for many readers who needed to save the money to buy it.

Modern homes were constructed in cities throughout Argentina during the middle decades of the twentieth century. In this article, I focus on the case of Mar del Plata, a medium-sized city and the most important tourist destination in Argentina.[6] Regional

© 2015 John Wiley & Sons Ltd

14680424, 2015, 3, Downloaded from https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/1468-0424.12164 by CONICET Consejo Nacional de Investigaciones, Wiley Online Library on [06/12/2022]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

differences were deep-seated, but they were most obvious between urban and rural spaces. By 1960, 72 per cent of the Argentinean population lived in an urban milieu.[7] Thus, some trends observed in Mar del Plata can be extrapolated to other Argentinean cities. However, this case also presents some peculiarities related to its characteristics as a tourist destination. Every summer, visitors, who came mostly from Buenos Aires, modelled new forms of consumption, which the provincial middle class was eager to imitate to achieve new signs of distinction. Tourism, moreover, stimulated an unusual level of growth in the building industry during this period in Mar del Plata.

The article is organised in three sections. First, I present the most relevant features of the model of domesticity that favoured men's presence at home, highlighting the ideal of togetherness on which it was based, and the middle-class identity that inspired it. In the following section, I explore the contrast between domestic tasks, objects and spaces designed for men and women, emphasising the tensions to which men's presence at home gave rise. I also explore the different meanings blue- and white-collar workers and their wives attributed to these tasks, objects and spaces, showing that conflicts between men and women over domestic masculinities differed by social class. Finally, I analyse masculine ways of being at home while avoiding family life. I show that 'masculine' ways of being at home played a significant role in confirming one's class identity during a period of intense social mobility. I also show that by the 1970s, the promise of social inclusion contained in this model of domesticity would be increasingly jeopardised by the growing inequalities within Argentine society.

These masculine ways of being at home could be labelled under what Margaret Marsh identified as 'masculine domesticities', which were inspired by an ideal of togetherness, and involved men in tasks previously performed by women (such as decoration and household repairs).[8] However, these practices could also be seen as part of what Steven Gelber called 'domestic masculinities', that is activities performed by men at home but in areas related to craftsmen's activities, which retained an aura of preindustrial vocational masculinity: from Gelber's perspective, the emergence of domestic masculinity involved the creation of a masculine realm within the home.[9] More recently, Beatriz Preciado noted that masculine post-domestic interiors emerged in the mid-twentieth century. Beyond their materialisation, they allowed a virtual escape from the suburban husband's life: the husband could be physically at home while still enjoying his own pleasures.[10] Despite the differences between these categories, I argue here that 'masculine domesticities', 'domestic masculinities' and 'masculine post-domestic interiors' are useful categories to highlight different meanings that can be attributed to similar practices over time and by different actors.

Men at home

In the middle decades of the twentieth century, modern homes became a key element in the image of domesticity identified with the middle class.[11] In Argentina, the expansion of the modern home acquired specific features within a context of 'democratisation of well-being', which was identified with Peronism but also characterised the subsequent decades.[12] Around the 1940s, the state began to intervene directly in the housing market, building new homes and financing cheap mortgage loans. Despite the political changes of the following years, the status acquired by the state as the guarantor of the 'right to a dwelling' was left behind only in the late 1970s. As a

© 2015 John Wiley & Sons Ltd

14680424, 2015, 3, Downloaded from https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/1468-0424.12164 by CONICET Consejo Nacional de Investigaciones, Wiley Online Library on [06/12/2022]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

consequence of these housing policies, Argentine society changed significantly. Whereas in 1947 only 37 per cent of the population owned the homes they inhabited, by 1980 this proportion had reached 67 per cent, a percentage significantly higher than that observed in other Latin American countries.[13]

In this scenario, to save money, many property owners chose to build their houses themselves in their free time, hiring specialists only to solve some specific problems and taking advantage of new products that facilitated the task. This practice was especially significant in Mar del Plata, where the housing market was relatively accessible. The building industry was boosted in the central decades of the century by the increasing numbers of middle-class tourists who wanted to buy their own summer house or apartment in the city. This made different resources – such as building materials, knowledge related to credit lines, professionals and specialised workers – available to the local residents, many of whom actually worked in this industry. Moreover, Mar del Plata was a growing town, with plenty of land sold on credit. Eusebio and Luis, whose stories are related below, are examples of local residents who built their own homes:

> The first thing I built was the bathroom. My brothers, my stepfather and I built it ... We dug, made the foundations, the septic tank, the walls, the floor, the ceiling ...[14]

> I spent my spare time working on this [his house] ... I started doing the foundations ... I didn't know how to place the frames, and there were things I couldn't do because I had no time, so I called a handyman ... Today ... everything's pre-made ...[15]

Eusebio was born in Mar del Plata in 1936. He started his first job, in a garage, when he was fourteen years old. Shortly after that, he started to work as a delivery boy for an important architect, for whom he worked for almost twenty years doing different and increasingly complex tasks while he was studying to become a master builder. Then, he started to work independently. He started to build his own house in 1958, when he was twenty-two years old. Luis was born in Mar del Plata in 1943, and works as a shopkeeper in one of his family-owned stores around the city. He began to build his house in the early 1970s, when he got married. Both Eusebio and Luis worked on the construction of their respective houses in their free time, though they had different levels of knowledge and experience. While Eusebio was a master builder, Luis learned from watching others and from reading some magazines that described materials, tools and procedures to be followed in order to build a house. Luis also took advantage of new products that made the work easier, and complemented his own work by hiring a handyman when needed.

In addition to home construction, building furniture was another means to obtain goods associated with the middle class. Using free time to improve one's own home and its furniture was also a sign of respectability, as it involved showing one's commitment to family life. Moreover, furniture built with one's own hands implied using materials that would otherwise have been discarded, reducing costs but also highlighting the builder's initiative and showing his technical knowledge and skills.[16]

While technical knowledge and manual work became typical ways to reach economic success and enter the world of industry by the 1920s, they acquired a new relevance in the context of Peronism. They were seen as 'workers' knowledge', contrasting with the traditional notion of a 'good education'.[17] Technological innovations and industrial workers, on one hand, and family well-being, on the other, were

© 2015 John Wiley & Sons Ltd

14680424, 2015, 3, Downloaded from https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/1468-0424.12164 by CONICET Consejo Nacional de Investigaciones, Wiley Online Library on [06/12/2022]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

Figure 1: Building a rocking-horse. *Mecánica Popular*, January 1953. Every possible attempt has been made to contact the owners for obtaining the copyright permission.

key elements in Peronist iconography, used to represent Argentinean social and economic progress, and particularly the 'democratisation of well-being'.[18] In the 1950s and 1960s, technical knowledge and manual work were still portrayed as ways of reaching economic success. Many advertisements published in Argentine magazines, such as *Hobby* and *Rico Tipo,* urged readers to take technical courses in order to earn money and independence, becoming one's own boss.

In these advertisements, earning money and independence often went hand in hand with becoming the head of a household. Both the advertisements and the projects proposed in magazines such as *Hobby* or *Mecánica Popular* entailed the strengthening of a modern family ideal, based on a companionate married couple and their beloved children. This family ideal was founded on affection, particularly for the children. While housework and domestic consumption has been seen as the expression of housewives' devotion to their family, do-it-yourself and home improvement projects can be seen as a parallel instance for men at home.[19] Through the 1940s to the 1960s children were the beneficiaries of many do-it-yourself projects portrayed in those magazines, such as the construction of toys, which appealed to the reader as a devoted father. As we shall see in the next excerpt, it was believed that time spent in crafting those objects gave them a special value, for both fathers and their children.

> The genuine joy that illuminates the children's faces when they receive a new toy pays back the efforts fathers make in order to provide them with everything they need to be happy. However, fathers' satisfaction would be infinitively deeper if they could say that the prettiest toy, their children's favorite, was made by dad himself ...[20]

The article quoted above and the images used to illustrate it are good examples of the ways in which the attributes traditionally associated with masculinity and domesticity were combined in these projects. On the one hand, in the text, the reader is referred to as 'dad', building toys for his 'children'. On the other hand, the images used

© 2015 John Wiley & Sons Ltd

14680424, 2015, 3, Downloaded from https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/1468-0424.12164 by CONICET Consejo Nacional de Investigaciones, Wiley Online Library on [06/12/2022]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

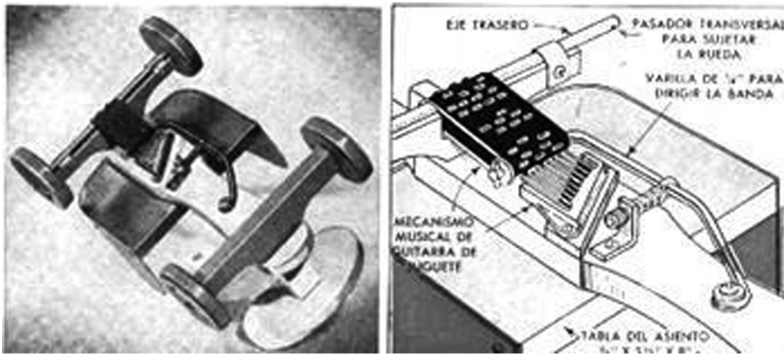

Figure 2: The rocking-horse mechanism. *Mecánica Popular*, January 1953. Every possible attempt has been made to contact the owners for obtaining the copyright permission.

to illustrate the article reinstate some elements that traditionally characterise masculinity: the mechanism underlying the toy highlights the technical knowledge required to complete this project. Finally, the image of the man leaning over the wood horse with a hammer combines both types of references: manual labour, know-how and the use of tools in the service of his children's happiness.

This article is also interesting in other ways. It was published in *Mecánica Popular*, a Spanish translation of a popular North American magazine. As such, it shows the 'travel' of do-it-yourself discourses, also present in local published magazines such as *Hobby*, which acquired specific connotations in Argentine society. In the Peronist period, working-class children's access to certain goods that had previously been limited to elite and middle-class families was presented as part of the democratisation of well-being.[21] In this context, for example, homemade toys could imply equality between children from different social backgrounds. However, they could also be seen as part of a 'modern' paternity that, according to Isabella Cosse, gained strength in the 1950s in media aimed at an educated and affluent reader.[22] This 'modern' paternity implied men's presence at home and their ability to show affection through play and dialogue. Thus, do-it-yourself projects did not acquire a single meaning in the Argentine society; they could be read by workers as a way to access goods that were previously reserved for the middle class, and by middle-class men as a sign of modernity, refinement and distinction.

The emphasis on family life that was dominant within the discourses of do-it-yourself and crafts magazines between the 1940s and 1960s can be related to 'masculine domesticities', as defined by Margaret Marsh.[23] Family togetherness was the ideal that inspired these images. Although this model of domesticity was identified with the middle class, it was also presented as affordable by and desirable for families from different social classes. However, as we shall see in the following sections, 'masculine domesticities' were challenged in different ways.

'Work', 'housework' and 'productive leisure' within the home

Do-it-yourself and home repair projects were mostly addressed to a masculine audience. Crafts and do-it-yourself magazines often incorporated sections for women, but

© 2015 John Wiley & Sons Ltd

14680424, 2015, 3, Downloaded from https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/1468-0424.12164 by CONICET Consejo Nacional de Investigaciones, Wiley Online Library on [06/12/2022]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

those sections were clearly differentiated. In one of the earliest issues of *Hobby*, for example, the editor apologised for the absence of projects women could carry out, promising the inclusion of knitting articles in future issues.[24] During the 1950s, new household products were also presented differently in advertisements addressed to men and women. Domestic appliances intended for housewives were described as 'electric servants' that would free them from housework, and thanks to which they would be able to remain rested and beautiful, whereas technical attributes were highlighted in products addressed to men. The chance for men to earn money was stressed even in the advertisements of objects intended only for domestic use. The home was presented as a recreational space that could (and should) be used 'productively'.

The capitalisation of free time also appears in the interviewees' discourse. The ability to earn extra money and save what it would cost to pay for someone else's work was an incentive to use leisure time in a 'productive' way. In Luis' words, whose story is quoted above:

> Capitalising your free time is [a way of earning] money ... Money you don't have to earn [in order] to pay someone else [to do something you need]. And the money that you don't have to earn will give you more free time ... I grew up in an environment of [Italian] immigrants ... They worked all week in construction, and on Saturdays and Sundays they built their own houses. When they finished building one person's house, they went to someone else's ...[25]

Free time was supposed to be used either to earn or save money; that money was supposed to be used to gain more free time. As we can see in Luis' discourse, this circular logic was based on an ethic of effort tied to a self-identification with immigrants' ethics.

In Argentina, middle-class identity was built on the image of those European immigrants who arrived en masse between the late nineteenth and mid-twentieth centuries and who were idealised as people who managed to improve their living conditions as a result of their own hard work.[26] This was an enduring image in Argentinean society. Though the quoted interviewee situates this work ethic in the 1940s, when he was a child, the same ethic was what gave meaning to the 'productive leisure' projects he performed as an adult in the 1970s.

The home workshop and its tools embodied those values of social mobility through hard work and represented a shared masculinity, especially for white-collar men, who spent their free time on various hobbies and do-it-yourself projects. For them, tools were not only a means to an end, but also a source of pride. In some of the interviews, the home workshop and its tools were described as part of the creation of a common masculine identity linked to a tradition of manual work that transcended class differences and, in some cases, was still viewed as being relevant to the present. This identity is presented as that of the 'workshop men'.

> We are all workshop men ... Generally, workshop men are all craftsmen. For example, there is one who is a carpenter ... There is another who is a plumber ... But there also are lawyers, doctors ...[27]

In this last excerpt, César, who works as a medical doctor, affirms that 'workshop men' could be either professionals or craftsmen: the only requirement was to love manual work. César was born in 1935 and got married in 1969. He is an anesthesiologist and has practiced aeromodelling since he was fourteen years old. In this excerpt, he groups different craft and manual activities performed by men at home as part of

© 2015 John Wiley & Sons Ltd

14680424, 2015, 3, Downloaded from https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/1468-0424.12164 by CONICET Consejo Nacional de Investigaciones, Wiley Online Library on [06/12/2022]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

a 'workshop men' identity. Technology had been a language shared by 'the skilled engineer with the skilled man who spent Sundays working at home' since the 1930s.[28] Professionals and white-collar interviewees took on this tradition to build a common masculine identity centred on a passion for technology and manual work, but why?

My interviewees entered the labour market in a context marked by major changes in women's economic activity rates. In 1947, women represented 19.8 per cent of the Argentinean workforce, but that proportion would increase in the subsequent decades: 21.5 per cent in 1960, and 25.3 per cent in 1970.[29] Jobs in the service sector were gaining relevance in the labour market for men, but especially so for women. Female participation in this sector grew steadily, and by 1970, women constituted 60 per cent of the Argentinean workers employed in it.[30] In this context, men who were not employed in jobs that required manual skills could see the work performed at home as a reinforcement of masculinity. While their jobs, increasingly developed in sexually integrated spaces, were a more ambiguous source of masculinity, hobbies and do-it-yourself projects provided them with the opportunity to recapture the pride of controlling one's work from its beginning to its end, justifying the existence of a predominantly masculine space within the home: the workshop.[31]

However, while the home workshop could be identified as a source of common masculine identity in the eyes of white-collar employees and professionals, for blue-collar workers, it occupied another place. The house workshop was not mainly a place for hobbies, but a 'productive' workplace. In their eyes, having one's own workshop was a sign of economic progress and upward social mobility; it meant being able to leave the status of 'employee' to become 'one's own boss'.

Both María's husband and José, who is quoted above, were skilled workers in the construction industry: one was a plumber and the other specialised in the construction of building facades. María was born in 1931 in Mar del Plata. She used to knit and sell the pieces she made. In the mid-1970s, when her husband started to earn more money, she could stop selling her knitting: 'He built a shed there . . . It was his office ... That was when he began to earn [more money]'.[32] José was born in 1928. At the age of 14, he started to work as a delivery boy, and then he became a construction worker. By the early 1970s, he started to work as an autonomous contractor, highlighting:

> In the back [of the house] we had a workshop ... I worked there, I had a little company, and I had all my tools there ... I didn't have it [the workshop] when I worked as an apprentice. [It was] later, when I could get a loan from bank . . . It was then that things began to change.[33]

María's husband's and José's working trajectories were relatively common in Mar del Plata, whose population was experiencing a progressive desalarisation process, parallel to an increase of independent workers.[34] Both María and José recall the building of their house workshop as part of a turning point in their working lives that implied leaving behind the condition of employees to become self-employed technicians.

The house workshop and home repair projects could also have other meanings for wives. As María Cristina expresses, for some women, the house workshop could be regarded as a confirmation of the ideal of togetherness:

> We shared almost everything, [we were] always together. [He] started working here [he had a garage at home] ... He'll soon be retiring, so he'll leave the house free [meaning that the house will no

© 2015 John Wiley & Sons Ltd

14680424, 2015, 3, Downloaded from https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/1468-0424.12164 by CONICET Consejo Nacional de Investigaciones, Wiley Online Library on [06/12/2022]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

> longer be a place of work] . . . The other day in my painting class, my classmates asked me 'how can you stand him [being at home all day long]!'[35]

María Cristina was born in 1947, and worked as a secretary until she got married in 1966. Her husband used to work as a mechanic. He built his garage for his business next to their home. Years later, he became a masseur. He received his patients at home and María Cristina worked as his secretary and receptionist. María Cristina describes her husband's presence at home as a form of companionship, although conflict over the use of the space surfaces in both the comments of her classmates and when she says that her husband's retirement will leave the house 'free'.

The resistance to the husband's presence at home (and to his workshop) was sometimes more openly expressed, and the attitudes wives had about work space at home varied by class. While the home workshop was not always well received by blue-collar workers' wives, who invested a particular value in home order, they often shared their husbands' view of it as a sign of upward mobility. The home workshop could also have an added value for them. For those who participated in their husbands' 'productive' activities by receiving clients, taking orders or keeping the accounts, the house workshop allowed them to actively help in increasing their family income and status without leaving the home.

In contrast, many professionals' wives did not view the house workshop so positively. From the time César got married in 1969 to the present day, he recounts conflicts with his wife over this space:

> I have a large workshop at home and [my wife] always speaks badly of it ... I'll fix everything in my workshop. [My wife] doesn't recognise that.[36]

Although some professionals and white collar workers' wives could be happy to have a space for their husbands at home, many of them saw the house workshop as a space that challenged home order and cleanliness, rather than as a sign of social mobility. Moreover, for many of them, the time their husbands spent in it – after their 'productive' activities performed outside the home – implied that the whole family would have to spend more time at home; wives would be taking care of children, instead of sharing their husbands' free time. Household repair and hobbies, performed by men alone in their free time, competed with other activities their wives could share.

'Togetherness' did not mean the same for men and women, or for women from different social classes. The same practices depicted in the previous section as reinforcing family life could also lead to conflicts between men and women over the use of domestic space and time. Men's presence at home did not necessarily imply that they shared time with their family. As we shall see in the following section, 'masculine domesticities' were also challenged by masculine ways of staying at home while being virtually elsewhere.

Masculinities, consumption and status within the home

Not only space but also time spent on projects such as those promoted in *Mecánica Popular* or *Hobby* could generate housewives' resistance. While men included their sons in some of these activities, in general terms, time devoted to hobbies, do-it-yourself and household repair projects competed with family time. Domestic masculinities

© 2015 John Wiley & Sons Ltd

14680424, 2015, 3, Downloaded from https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/1468-0424.12164 by CONICET Consejo Nacional de Investigaciones, Wiley Online Library on [06/12/2022]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

were articulated with an unprecedented popular presence in the public space.[37] In fact, many of the activities men developed at home as hobbies were aimed at meeting other men, or at least at freeing themselves from the 'home's restraints'. These activities were a way of responding to the ideal of togetherness, while limiting wives' presence and reaching an exclusively masculine and extra-domestic sociability on weekends.

Weekends were a time when tensions around the uses of free time surfaced, particularly regarding wives' chances of getting outside the home and neighbourhood where they had spent all week. From the late 1920s, the number of automobiles in Argentina increased dramatically, from 53,676 units in 1921 to 325,748 in 1931. By 1942, there were 450,000 cars in the country, a number that would grow significantly in the following decades in line with the expansion of the local automobile industry. In that context, vacations and weekend trips began to be not only desirable but possible for wider sectors of the Argentinean population.[38] However, most of the households that had a car had only one, which was usually driven by the man of the house. If he decided to spend his spare time on an activity from which his wife was excluded, such as aeromodelling competitions and other homosocial activities related to hobbies, her chances of going out reduced significantly.

Actually leaving the home was not the only way in which men escaped its restraints. Many products designed to be used by men at home were advertised as providing the possibility of enjoying their own time and avoiding spending time with their family. For instance, high-fidelity music players were presented as luxury items for middle-class adult men. Advertisements emphasised the 'effects of space' and the sensation of being in the concert hall generated by these appliances, elements that referred to a virtual absence from the home.[39]

In this respect, the contrast between two articles published in *Casas y Jardines* (the first in February 1962 and the second in March 1964) highlights differences in the way these items were presented to men and women.[40] Both articles assume that high-fidelity music players were valued only by those who already knew and appreciated high art. The first article was addressed to a middle-class, young, married man, looking for a location to improve his new high fidelity player's acoustics.[41] The second article speaks to a middle-class, young, married woman, whose main concern was not sound but decoration, specifically, 'how to hide the unsightly speakers'.[42] These differences were displayed in the illustrations of both articles: in the illustration of the first article, a man was listening to music; the second article's illustration depicted a woman arranging records.

While in the 1940s and 1950s men could use do-it-yourself and home improvement projects to virtually leave family life, this was not emphasised in magazines such as *Mecánica Popular* and *Hobby*. However, by the mid-1960s, these magazines would stress men's virtual absence from the home, appealing to the fantasies built around the figure of the bachelor. Isabella Cosse has observed that during the 1960s, men increasingly began to see marriage as an imposition, which involved the loss of masculine sociability, casual flirting and money available for their own leisure.[43]

Eliseo, born in 1943, expresses this vision. He worked in different local papers and in his parents' pharmacy, after leaving his university studies and travelling around the country. He got married at the age of thirty-eight.

© 2015 John Wiley & Sons Ltd

14680424, 2015, 3, Downloaded from https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/1468-0424.12164 by CONICET Consejo Nacional de Investigaciones, Wiley Online Library on [06/12/2022]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

Figure 3: Listening to music: *Casas y Jardines*, February, 1962.

Figure 4: Arranging the records: *Casas y Jardines*, March, 1964.

Eliseo: I was a grown up man, but my family insisted, 'You must formalise, you must make a home', [but] I honestly had no interest [in getting married].
Interviewer: How old were you [when you got married]?
E: I was thirty-eight years old. I wanted to remain single, but in the end I got married. [. . .]. We had two [children].
I: Would you have liked to have more [children]?
E: I don't know. I got scared with the first one, because a lot of responsibilities fell on me . . . [44]

Although marriage was still a desirable prospect for most men, fantasies linked to the figure of the bachelor who could spend money on his own pleasures were repeatedly

© 2015 John Wiley & Sons Ltd

14680424, 2015, 3, Downloaded from https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/1468-0424.12164 by CONICET Consejo Nacional de Investigaciones, Wiley Online Library on [06/12/2022]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

used in the representations of masculinity that would appear in new magazines, such as *Adán*, addressed towards a young and sophisticated masculine readership.[45] In the late 1960s and 1970s, these masculinities would also be portrayed in crafts and do-it-yourself magazines, in images of chic and not necessarily family interiors. Both *Hobby* and *Mecánica Popular* would include advertisements of sumptuous goods and propose different projects inspired by sophisticated domestic spaces and selective images of well-being. For young, middle-class men, being at home could be a masculine practice, but it referred to a different imaginary, in which effort and necessity gave place to sophistication and pleasure.[46]

Luxurious domesticities portrayed in popular magazines were not new. However, while in the 1950s and 1960s, men from different social sectors could purchase some goods identified with middle-class domesticities, in the subsequent decades, the market diversification and an increasing social stratification would lead to stronger class differentiations.[47] In the 1950s and 1960s, do-it-yourself could be viewed as a way to access goods identified with the middle classes (such as furniture, electric appliances and, in some cases, even one's own house), whereas, by the late 1970s and early 1980s those strategies were viewed with irony. Criticism was not expressed from the point of view of those who could afford chic lifestyles, but from the perspective of those who were told they could reach them if they worked hard enough. The use of the phrase '*Macánica Popular*' in the following excerpt is significant. '*Mecánica*' (mechanics) becomes '*Macánica*' (referring to '*macana*' that is defined as 'lie'): the article suggests that the image of an egalitarian society, where differences depended on one's own work, was not a truthful one (at least not any longer).

> *Macánica Popular* ... While today's standard of living is very high . . . there are always some stragglers who look at us askance, with that unmistakable hint of social resentment. The worst is that they don't need to be resentful ... You love those pompous couches . . . Believe it or not, you can have a sofa like that as well. Don't get mad. It's not a joke. Do you have a pillow? ... That's it. Tie it back there [to your backside]. Now sit on a bench or on a drawer . . . [There you have:] A proper sofa . . .[48]

The presence of chic interiors and luxury goods in 'do-it-yourself' magazines also spoke to their circulation beyond audiences strictly addressed by elegant advertisements of luxury goods, such as music players. In fact, music players also functioned as status symbols among poorer social sectors. The criteria according to which upper and popular sectors appreciated them, however, were different. While for the upper and middle classes, fashionable designs and technical innovations were the most important features in selecting a music player, the popular and lower-middle classes were more interested in showy music players. As one salesman recalls, his boss advised him to choose those music players 'with more lights' for the store where he worked, 'because that's the only thing "*negros*" care about'.[49]

If middle-class and workers' masculinities had elements in common, they were also marked by intense inequalities that would deepen from the mid-1970s. Scholars have recently sustained that the 'middle-class' identity arose in opposition to Peronism's celebration of the working class in the 1940s and 1950s. This opposition was built on racial categories: the middle class was identified with the white European descendants, characterising the workers as '*negros*', descendants of internal migrants with an indigenous past. Racial categories did not strictly refer to phenotypic

© 2015 John Wiley & Sons Ltd

14680424, 2015, 3, Downloaded from https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/1468-0424.12164 by CONICET Consejo Nacional de Investigaciones, Wiley Online Library on [06/12/2022]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

characteristics, but expressed a class position: a person could either have a lighter or darker skin and still be classified as a '*negro*' because of his or her behaviour and consumption habits.[50] These categories gained a new place from the mid-1970s, in a context where middle-class salaries depreciated and would continue to do so in the decades to come, where many of those who self-identified as middle class saw their social status jeopardised. In that context, the use of racial categories to stress social differences (visible in consumption habits) intensified.[51]

The importance of the consumption of objects such as music players as signs of status and masculinity can be explained, at least partially, by the impossibility of accessing other goods that had traditionally occupied that place, such as housing, especially for young men who were starting a family.[52] The second half of the 1970s marked a break in working- and middle-class consumption capacity, linked to rising levels of unemployment and inflation. In this scenario, the usual signs of masculinity, associated with the breadwinner figure, became increasingly difficult to achieve. In the next excerpt, Ernesto, who was born in 1948, establishes a contrast between his father's and his own experiences attempting to buy a house for their families. First, Ernesto speaks of the easiness with which his father could buy his own house and a truck in the late 1950s, from his earnings as a longshoreman, and without needing his wife to supplement those wages. Then, he remembers the difficulties he and his wife found when in the 1970s they wanted to buy a house. Although they had both worked hard and had managed to buy an apartment and even a car before getting married in 1971, when they sold the apartment in order to buy a bigger house in 1975, the serious inflation in the country's economy obliged them to settle for a little house in poor condition, a house they are still fixing up to this day.

> In 1957 [my father] bought a house and a truck, while being an employee and being the only one who worked at home. My mother was a housewife ... [Before I got married, I had three jobs] I worked in jewellery, I worked in Entel [telecommunications] and when I came home I repaired watches. My wife also worked in Textilana and she earned good wages. We got to buy an apartment ... and then we got married in 1971. We sold the apartment ... just in time for the Rodrigazo [he refers to an inflation process that reached 777 per cent in 1975] ... and that [money] was not enough to buy anything, not a pipe. We could [finally] afford to buy the house in which we [still] live ... which needed a lot of repairing, but I had no more money than that, so we had to settle for it. My wife and I worked years fixing it, and it is not finished yet.[53]

The dictatorship that ruled the country between 1976 and 1983 introduced neoliberal policies that were strengthened in the following decades under civilian governments. This economic model led to the decline of real salaries and increasing unemployment rates in jobs that had traditionally employed men. This process pushed many wives into the labour force.[54] By 1980, 31 per cent of the female population participated in the labour market.[55] In that context, young women, both from the middle class and the popular sectors, no longer expected marital togetherness, at least, not as it was defined in the 1940s and 1950s; instead, they started to complain about their 'second shift', and critiqued the sexual division of labour.[56]

Conclusions

In Argentina, hobbies, do-it-yourself and home repair projects were key elements of men's presence at home in the middle decades of the twentieth century. These

© 2015 John Wiley & Sons Ltd

14680424, 2015, 3, Downloaded from https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/1468-0424.12164 by CONICET Consejo Nacional de Investigaciones, Wiley Online Library on [06/12/2022]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

masculine ways of being at home were part of a model of domesticity identified with the middle class, though appropriated in distinct ways by people from different social sectors. Workers and middle-class men experienced their presence in the home, and the conflicts such domestic masculinities could spark with wives, in different ways.

The home workshop is a good example of these differences. On the one hand, white-collar workers and professionals saw it as the materialisation of their technical expertise and the confirmation of a common masculine identity. From the perspective of manual and blue-collar workers, it marked a turning point in an upwardly mobile pathway toward becoming one's own boss. On the other hand, while it gave the wives of many manual and blue-collar workers the opportunity of making more visible their contribution to their family's progress, the wives of white-collar employees and professionals often regarded it as a messy space where their husbands wasted their free time in activities from which they were excluded.

Until the late 1960s, do-it-yourself was presented as a strategy to attain goods identified with the middle class. However, in the following decades, increasing social stratification would transform home repair and crafts into a subject of irony. The development of sophisticated masculine spaces, equipped with luxurious items, coincided with the degradation of the purchasing power of the lower-middle-class and popular sectors and therefore increasing difficulties in accessing goods that traditionally guaranteed the provider status, such as housing.

'Masculine domesticities', 'domestic masculinities' and 'masculine post-domestic interiors' can be used to describe coexisting ways of men's presence at home. These categories also allow us to see a transformation in men's ways of being at home over time. If the democratisation of well-being, home ownership and free time were the conditions that allowed the extension of masculine domesticities/domestic masculinities after the 1940s, by the 1970s, they would give way to fragmented and exclusionary imaginaries that reflected an increasingly stratified society.

Notes

I am grateful to Raffaella Sarti and the anonnymous *Gender & History* reviewers for their accurate comments of a first version of this text.

1. Ricardo Aroskind, 'El país del desarrollo posible', in Daniel James, *Violencia, proscripción y autoritarismo (1955–1976)* (Buenos Aires: Sudamericana, 2003), pp. 63–116.
2. Isabella Cosse, *Pareja, sexualidad y familia en los años sesenta* (Buenos Aires: Siglo XXI, 2010); Natalia Milanesio, 'A Man Like You: Juan Domingo Perón and the Politics of Affection in Mid-Twentieth-Century Argentina', *Gender & History* 26 (2014), pp. 84–104. The research on masculinities has been strongly developed in Latin America within the last decades. Summaries of this research can be found in Matthew Gutmann (ed.), *Changing Men and Masculinities in Latin America* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003) and Oscar Hernández, 'Estudios sobre masculinidades. Aportes desde América Latina', *Revista de Antropología Experimental* 7 (2007), pp. 153–60.
3. For Argentina, consumption has only recently earned a place in historical studies. See Fernando Rocchi, 'Inventando la soberanía del consumidor: publicidad, privacidad y revolución del mercado en la Argentina (1860–1940)', in Fernando Devoto and Marta Madero (eds), *Historia de la vida privada en la Argentina* (Buenos Aires: Taurus, 1999), pp. 301–21; Eduardo Elena, *Dignifying Argentina: Peronism, Citizenship, and Mass Consumption* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2011); Natalia Milanesio, *Workers Go Shopping in Argentina: The Rise of Popular Consumer Culture* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2013). The same can be said about domesticity. See Marcela Nari, *Políticas de maternidad y maternalismo político* (Buenos Aires: Biblos, 2004); Rebekah Pite, *Creating a Common Table in Twentieth-Century Argentina: Doña Petrona, Women, and Food* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2013).

© 2015 John Wiley & Sons Ltd

14680424, 2015, 3, Downloaded from https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/1468-0424.12164 by CONICET Consejo Nacional de Investigaciones, Wiley Online Library on [06/12/2022]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

4. The quantity of interviews with each subject varied between one and three, and each took an average time of one hour. I conducted the interviews myself (the first twenty-four between 2004 and 2005 and the rest between 2006 and 2010).
5. I also analysed other magazines: addressed at men (*Status* and *Nuevo Rico Tipo*), at women (*Para ti* and *Claudia*), general interest (*Rico Tipo* and *El hogar*) and decoration (*Casas y Jardines*).
6. During this period, Mar del Plata's population experienced considerable growth, from 124,000 inhabitants in 1947 to 225,000 in 1960 and 434,000 in 1980. Ana Núñez, *Morfología Social de Mar del Plata (1874–1990)* (Tandil: ANPCT, 2000); Juan Carlos Torre y Elisa Pastoriza, 'Mar del Plata, un sueño de los argentinos', in Fernando Devoto and Marta Madero, *Historia de la vida privada en la Argentina* (Buenos Aires: Taurus Tomo III, 1999).
7. Zulma de Lattes and Alfredo Lattes, *La población de Argentina* (Buenos Aires: CICRED Series, 1975).
8. Margaret Marsh, *Suburban Lives* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1990).
9. Steven Gelber, *Hobbies: Leisure and the Culture of Work in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999).
10. Beatriz Preciado, *Pornotopía. Arquitectura y sexualidad en '*Playboy*' durante la guerra fría* (Barcelona: Anagrama, 2010). Preciado specifically refers to the interiors created by *Playboy*. However, I will extend the use of the notion of 'post-domestic interiors' to other ways of being physically at home but virtually elsewhere.
11. Denise Lawrence-Zúñiga, 'Condiciones materiales de la vida familiar', in David Kertzer and Marzio Barbagli, *La vida familiar en el siglo XX. Historia de la familia europea*, vol. 3 (Barcelona: Paidós, 2004), pp. 49–114.
12. Juan C. Torre and Elisa Pastoriza, 'La democratización del bienestar', in Juan Carlos Torre, *Los años peronistas* (Buenos Aires: Sudamericana, 2002), pp. 257–312.
13. Anahí Ballent, 'Políticas de vivienda, arquitectura doméstica y culturas del habitar', in Susana Torrado (ed.), *Población y bienestar en la Argentina del primero al segundo Centenario. Una historia social del siglo XX,* vol. II (Buenos Aires: Edhasa, 2007), pp. 413–38.
14. Interview with Eusebio, Mar del Plata, January 2007.
15. Interview with Luis, Mar del Plata, April 2010.
16. Jean Baudrillard, *Crítica a la economía política del signo* (México: Siglo XXI, 1999).
17. Beatriz Sarlo, *La imaginación técnica: Sueños modernos de la cultura argentina* (Buenos Aires: Nueva Visión, 1992); Inés Dussel and Pablo Pineau, 'De cuando la clase obrera entró al paraíso: la educación técnica estatal en el primer peronismo', in Sandra Carli (ed.), *Discursos pedagógicos e imaginario social en el peronismo (1945–1955)* (Buenos Aires: Galerna, 1995), pp. 150–55.
18. Marcela Gené, *Un mundo feliz. Imágenes de los trabajadores en el primer peronismo* (Buenos Aires: CFE, 2005).
19. Daniel Miller, *Ir de compras: una teoría* (México, Siglo XXI, 1999).
20. 'Juguetes para el Pequeñuelo', *Mecánica Popular*, January 1953.
21. Isabella Cosse, *Estigmas de nacimiento: Peronismo y orden familiar, 1946–1955* (Buenos Aires: FCE/UdeSA, 2006).
22. Isabella Cosse, *Pareja, sexualidad,* p. 182.
23. Marsh, *Suburban Lives.*
24. 'La página del director', *Hobby*, September 1936.
25. Interview with Luis, Mar del Plata, April 2010. In this excerpt, Luis refers to the late 1940s and early 1950s.
26. Enrique Garguin, 'Los argentinos descendemos de los barcos': The Racial Articulation of Middle-Class Identity in Argentina, 1920–1960', in Ricardo López and Barbara Weinstein (eds), *The Making of the Middle Class: Toward a Transnational History* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), pp. 355–76.
27. Interview with César, Mar del Plata, May, 2010.
28. Inés Dussel and Pablo Pineau, 'De cuando la clase obrera entró al paraíso', p. 114.
29. Catalina Wainerman, 'Mujeres que trabajan. Hechos e ideas', in Torrado (ed.), *Población y bienestar,* pp. 325–52.
30. Wainerman, 'Mujeres que trabajan'.
31. Steven Gelber makes a similar point analysing domestic masculinities in the US.
32. Interview with María, Mar del Plata, June, 2007.
33. Interview with José, Mar del Plata, March, 2009.
34. This was the happy face of a process associated with an increase of instability and insecurity in the job market. Núñez, *Morfología Social*, pp. 62–3.
35. Interview with María Cristina, Mar del Plata, August, 2008.

© 2015 John Wiley & Sons Ltd

14680424, 2015, 3, Downloaded from https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/1468-0424.12164 by CONICET Consejo Nacional de Investigaciones, Wiley Online Library on [06/12/2022]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

36. Interview with César, Mar del Plata, May, 2010.
37. Mirta Varela, 'Los comienzos de la televisión argentina en el contexto latinoamericano', Latin American Studies Association, 1998, p. 10. <http://diegolevis.com.ar/audiovisual/MVarela.pdf>.
38. Melina Piglia, *Autos, rutas y turismo. El Automóvil Club Argentino y el Estado* (Buenos Aires: Siglo XXI, 2014); Anahí Ballent, 'Políticas de vivienda'.
39. A similar process has been observed in the United States. Keir Keightley, '"Turn It down!" She Shrieked: Gender, Domestic Space, and High Fidelity, 1948–59', *Popular Music* 15 (1996), pp. 149–77.
40. *Casas y Jardines* was an Argentine magazine. Although its name replicated an American magazine, as far as I know, they have no connection.
41. 'Música en el hogar. Cómo ubicar los equipos de Hi Fi (Alta Fidelidad) estereofónicos', in *Casas y Jardines*, February 1962), p. 46.
42. 'Música en el hogar. Más Fidelidad con Hi Fi, (Alta Fidelidad)', in *Casas y jardines*, March 1964, p. 33.
43. Cosse, *Pareja, sexualidad*, p. 119.
44. Interview with Eliseo, Mar del Plata, December 2008.
45. Sergio Pujol, *La década rebelde. Los años 60 en la Argentina* (Buenos Aires: Emecé, 2002).
46. For an analysis of *Playboy* in North America, see Elizabeth Fraterrigo, *Playboy and the Making of the Good Life in Modern America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).
47. Ricardo Aroskind, 'El país'.
48. 'Macánica Popular. Cómo sentirse bacán aunque a uno no le dé el cuero', *Nuevo Rico Tipo*, May, 1980. *Nuevo Rico Tipo* was first produced in 1979, but its name echoed that of another very popular magazine called *Rico Tipo*, published from 1944 to 1972, addressed at a general, though mainly masculine, audience. *Nuevo Rico Tipo* took on and even intensified the satirical tone of the original magazine. However, it did not have the same success as its predecessor.
49. Interview with Rubén, Mar del Plata, March, 2010. Rubén worked as a salesman in different stores in Mar del Plata during the 1970s and 1980s.
50. Garguin, 'Los argentinos descendemos de los barcos'; Pierre Bourdieu, *La distinción. Criterio y bases sociales del gusto* (Buenos Aires: Taurus, 1998).
51. Sergio Visacovsky and Enrique Garguin (eds), *Moralidades, economías e identidades de la clase media. Estudios históricos y etnográficos* (Buenos Aires: Antropofagia, 2009).
52. Elizabeth Jelin, 'Family and Household: Outside World and Private Life', in Elizabeth Jelin (ed.), *Family, Household, and Gender Relations in Latin America* (London: Kegan Paul International Unesco, 1991), pp. 12–39.
53. Interview with Ernesto, Mar del Plata, June 2010.
54. Catalina Wainerman, 'Mujeres que trabajan. Hechos e ideas'.
55. Gloria Bonder and Mónica Rosenfeld, *Equidad de género en Argentina. Datos, problemáticas y observaciones para la acción* (Buenos Aires: PNUD/FLACSO, 2004).
56. Arlie Hochschild and Anne Machung, *Working Parents and the Revolution at Home* (New York: Penguin, 1987).

© 2015 John Wiley & Sons Ltd

14680424, 2015, 3, Downloaded from https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/1468-0424.12164 by CONICET Consejo Nacional de Investigaciones, Wiley Online Library on [06/12/2022]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License