



Journal of Historical Research in Marketing

Growing consumer rights in neoliberal times: The top-down origins of consumer organizations in Argentina between 1978 and 1993

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Article information:

To cite this document:

Pablo Federico Pryluka , (2015), "Growing consumer rights in neoliberal times", Journal of Historical Research in Marketing, Vol. 7 Iss 3 pp. 373 - 388

Permanent link to this document:

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/JHRM-09-2014-0031>

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Growing consumer rights in neoliberal times

Growing
consumer
rights

The top-down origins of consumer organizations in Argentina between 1978 and 1993

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Received 19 September 2014

Revised 24 April 2015

22 May 2015

15 June 2015

Accepted 15 June 2015

Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is threefold: first, to analyze the origins of Adelco in the context of the “Consumer Orientation Campaign” (Orientación Para El Consumidor, OPEC, in Spanish) promoted by the Ministry of Economy between 1978 and 1981; second, to describe the main characteristics of Adelco during its first years, especially its activities, structure and its international connections; finally, to contribute to the study of consumer organizations in Argentina and Latin America, where very little research has been done on the subject.

Design/methodology/approach – This article is organized into three sections. First, it outlines the deep transformations taking place in the Argentine economy during the military regime, highlighting particularly the variations in inflation rates and a series of inflation-related policies. It goes on to offer a brief overview of some new studies in consumer history in Argentina as well as an analysis of the Consumer Orientation campaign, promoted by Martínez de Hoz, the Minister of Economy from 1978 to 1981. Finally, it details the origins and key features of Adelco. For source material, this paper uses a qualitative approach, working with government documents, interviews and magazines. It also makes use of the *Minutes of the Board of Directors Meeting* of Adelco. At the same time, this paper contributes to current debates in the history of consumption.

Findings – This paper reaches two main conclusions. First, while Adelco may have presented itself as a non-government organization (NGO) linked to consumer interests and responsive to grass-roots pressures, it maintained a top-down structure with close ties to state policy. Second, Adelco was part of what Matthew Hilton has analyzed as a shift in the consumer movement of the last several decades: a change from collective action to individual choice.

Originality/value – The main value of the paper rests on three factors. First, it offers an insight into the origins of Adelco, the first consumer defense NGO in Argentina. Second, it studies sources that have never previously been analyzed, such as the *Minutes of the Board of Directors meeting* and personal interviews. Third, it shows the ties between the origins of Adelco and the consumer policy of the military government in Argentina.

Keywords Consumption history, Economic history, Consumer society, Argentina, Adelco, Consumer organization

Paper type Research paper



Journal of Historical Research in

Marketing

Vol. 7 No. 3, 2015

pp. 373-388

© Emerald Group Publishing Limited

1755-750X

DOI 10.1108/JHRM-09-2014-0031

This research was supported by a PhD scholarship given by the National Scientific and Technical Research Council. The author would like to thank Dr Fernando Rocchi and Dra Ana Grondona for their advice, and Dra Claudia Collado for allowing the author the access to Adelco.

Introduction

In recent years, the history of consumption has seen a remarkable growth. This increased attention can be understood as a response to what Frank Trentmann has referred to as a “philosophical engagement with modernity (or its disappearance)” (Trentmann, 2004). Both critical sociology and orthodox economic liberalism have analyzed consumption and consumers from opposite but related perspectives: the former, criticizing the rise of a postmodernist society in which citizens and public interest have retreated before the advance of self-interested consumers and the latter, championing liberalization policies that would favor rational agents of the market engaged in free consumer choice. In opposition to this dualistic approach, a new historical perspective emerged focusing on the historical transformation in consumer rationality, consumer identity, the relation between consumption and citizenship and other forms of organization (Trentmann, 2006). As part of this new approach to consumption, consumer organizations have been one of the main topics studied.

Within this context, this article analyzes the origins of “Consumer Action” (*Acción Del Consumidor*, Adelco, in Spanish), the first consumer advocate non-government organization (NGO) in Argentina, founded in 1980[1]. From the date of its inception, Adelco advanced as the sole organization of its kind and grew steadily with each passing year. It was only in 1993 that another consumer organization would appear in Argentina. At the same time, Adelco played a key role in the passing of Law 22240, a consumer defense bill (1993), and again served in an advisory role with the Constitutional reform of 1994, overseeing the inclusion of several consumer rights provisions into the constitutional text. While Rhodes (2006) has studied the importance of Adelco and other consumer organizations in Latin America during the market-oriented reforms of the 1990’s, this article will focus on the emergence of this civil society organization during the Argentine military dictatorship (1976-1983).

The following article has three main objectives:

- (1) to analyze the origins of Adelco in the context of the “Consumer Orientation Campaign” (*Orientación Para El Consumidor*, OPEC, in Spanish) promoted by the Ministry of Economy between 1978 and 1981;
- (2) to describe the main characteristics of Adelco during its first years, especially its activities, structure and its international connections; and
- (3) to contribute to the study of consumer organizations in Argentina and Latin America, where very little research has been done on the subject.

At the same time, this paper maintains two main hypotheses:

- H1.* While Adelco may have presented itself as an NGO linked to consumer interests and responsive to grass-roots pressures, it maintained a top-down structure with close ties to state policy.
- H2.* Adelco was part of what Hilton (2009) has analyzed as a shift in the consumer movement of the past several decades: a change from collective action to individual choice.

With these objectives in mind, this article is organized into three sections. First, it outlines the deep transformations taking place in the Argentine economy during the military regime, highlighting particularly the variations in inflation rates and a series of

inflation-related policies. It goes on to offer a brief overview of some new studies in consumer history in Argentina as well as an analysis of the Consumer Orientation campaign, promoted by Martínez de Hoz, the Minister of Economy from 1978 to 1981. Finally, it details the origins and key features of Adelco. For source material, this paper uses a qualitative approach, working with government documents, interviews and magazines. It also makes use of the *Minutes of the Board of Directors Meeting of Adelco*.

Economic reforms in Argentina

On the morning of March 24, 1976, the leaders of the Armed Forces issued a statement announcing the deposition of President Isabel Martínez de Perón and the beginning of a new military government, part of the so-called National Reorganization Process (NRP). While the overthrow of constitutional order deserves its own detailed treatment (Rougier and Fiszbein, 2009; Carassai, 2013), this article focuses on some of the economic developments taking place during the period.

With the designation of José Ber Gelbard as the new Minister of Economy in 1973, it was clear that Peron, back from his long exile, intended to carry on with the old policies of the first Peronism (1946-1955). Therefore, the new government pursued a development policy based on industrial growth with strong state intervention, targeting wealth distribution and price stability. However, this project was put at risk by two weaknesses:

- (1) Argentina's recurring currency crisis – known for its effects as *stop and go* – could limit the state's ability to regulate markets and support loans and subsidies for industrial projects; and
- (2) the struggle over wealth distribution, especially under a government committed to improving workers' salaries, would prove to be a constant source of tension (Rougier and Fiszbein, 2009, pp. 60-65).

During those years, Peron introduced tough new measures to control prices and fight growing inflation rates. In fact, under the National Agreement Act of 1973, workers and businessmen agreed to freeze prices and salaries for two years. Nevertheless, as we can see from the variation of retail prices (Figure 2), this strategy had clear limits. Furthermore, repressed inflation provoked complaints from a liberal sector that clamored for structural adjustments and liberalization of prices. After Peron's death on July 1, 1974, and with the succession of Isabel Martínez de Perón to the presidency, trade unions began to exert greater pressures and increased political violence contributed to increased government instability. Although, traditionally, commercial and fiscal problems were solved with devaluation and the suppression of real wages, the political context in 1974 and 1975 precluded any possibility of considering those alternatives due to the strength of the labor movement. By contrast, what followed was the succession of five Ministers of Economy – Alfredo Gomez Morales, Celestino Rodrigo, Pedro Bonanni, Antonio Cafiero and Emilio Mondelli, none of whom had the political capital to control the process (Rougier and Fiszbein, 2009, p. 221)[2].

Facing rising inflation, economic destabilization and growing tensions within the ranks of Peronism itself, a widespread skepticism took hold of the middle class (Carassai, 2013). The *coup d'État*, carried out by the Armed Forces and supported by some factions of the local and international establishment, must be understood in that context of instability (Basualdo, 2002, 2010). Unlike previous military governments, the

NRP embraced a discourse of national rebirth. Marcos Novaro and Vicente Palermo have highlighted this fact by analyzing the announcements and proclamations of the Armed Forces. The military government pursued a project of political and moral reFOUNDATION with the express purpose of saving the *Patria* (the homeland) from all its problems. Although they considered Peronism the true source of the crisis, it was, on their account, an illness extending to the institutional framework and associated with the import substitution industrialization (ISI) policies (Novaro and Palermo, 2011, p. 27) [3]. Actions taken by Alfredo Martínez de Hoz, the new Minister of Economy, were also inspired by ideas of national rebirth.

Pablo Gerchunoff and Lucas Llach have emphasized a crucial issue bearing on the subject: the changes taking place in the sphere of economic policies were reflected in the academic and intellectual fields. Starting from the beginning of the 1970s, Keynesianism was losing its primacy among mainstream economists all over the world. In addition, although monetarism may have been gaining prestige in academic circles, the Chilean experience that followed Pinochet's *coup d'État* of 1973 was a more immediate model for Argentine military officials. In fact, both the Chilean and the Argentine experiences represented the first cases where the new economic prescriptions were being applied (Gerchunoff and Llach, 2010, pp. 352-357). Alfredo Pucciarelli has studied Martínez de Hoz's economic project and has shown how, from his first speech as Minister on April 2 1976, he already was speaking about the need for a change of direction in national political economy. As the Minister himself proclaimed:

From now on, I will not talk about the past except when it is necessary to learn certain lessons. We should look towards the future to build the glory of the country together (La Prensa, 1976, p. 1).

In other words, he wanted to dismantle the model that combined state intervention and industrial growth, the same model whose roots went back to the beginning of the ISI in the 1930s. From his perspective, this model was the foundation on which uneasy alliances between the state, trade unions and businessmen were built. Thus, market liberalization and the restriction of state intervention were crucial for a new Argentina (Pucciarelli, 2004, pp. 109-116). Again, Martínez de Hoz pointed out in his inaugural speech:

The artificial corrections for this phenomenon [inflation], such as price controls, exchange rate controls, import controls, exportation subsidies, all of them act, particularly, not over the causes, but over the consequences of the phenomenon, thus generating scarcity, black markets, capital flight and a general distortion of the economic structure of the country (La Prensa, 1976, p. 3).

Mariana Heredia, for her part, has focused on how the dictatorship acted as a hinge for the acceptance and dissemination of technocratic liberalism. From then on, a consensus was established in which economic liberalism acted as the unique framework to elaborate public policies (Heredia, 2004).

The policies introduced by the Minister of Economy were translated into a number of deep reforms that modified Argentina's productive structure. Reforms to the financial system were first enacted in June 1977. Foremost among those reforms, it lifted Central Bank oversight over other banking and financial activity. From then on, all banks were able to determine their own interest rates and were free to gather deposits that for the first time would be guaranteed by the Central Bank itself. Taking into account that there

were no controls of the kind of deposits taken by the banks or any restrictions on the behavior of the financial institutions themselves, this was a favorable context for speculation in the financial market. Second, industrial production suffered a big shock when protectionist policies were abandoned. In fact, Martinez de Hoz promoted lifting tariff barriers and the reduction of subsidies and incentives for industrial entrepreneurs. As a consequence, the local market was overrun with imported articles, while local industries, suffocated by high interest rates, reduced their share of gross domestic product (GDP). Real wages fell sharply as result of price deregulation (Figure 1).

Educating consumers

Against this background, with the liberalization of internal and external commerce and relative fiscal adjustment, the Minister of Economy also had to deal with an inflation rate that never dropped below 100 per cent annually (Figure 2). Although they managed to scale back the peak inflation of 1975-1976, prices continued to rise all during those years. Moreover, in 1981, a new price increase cycle began (Figure 2). To tackle this problem, Martinez de Hoz applied different, and sometimes contradictory, solutions (Gerchunoff and Llach, 2010, pp. 362-367). One of them was the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPECs) campaign, started at the end of 1978. Underlying this initiative was the idea that, given the changes introduced into the rules

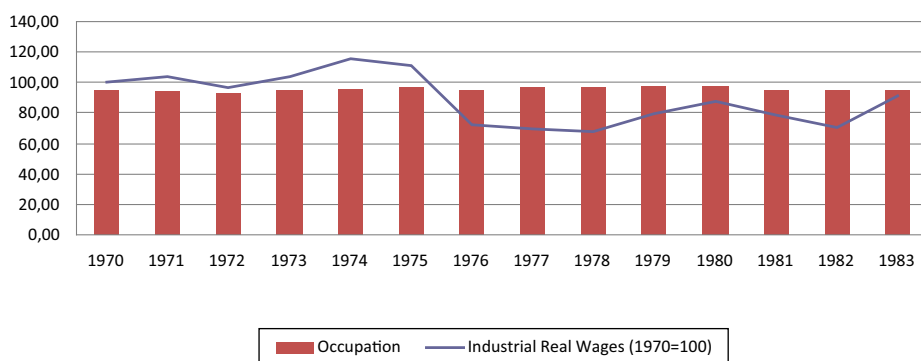


Figure 1.
Evolution of
industrial real wages
and occupation

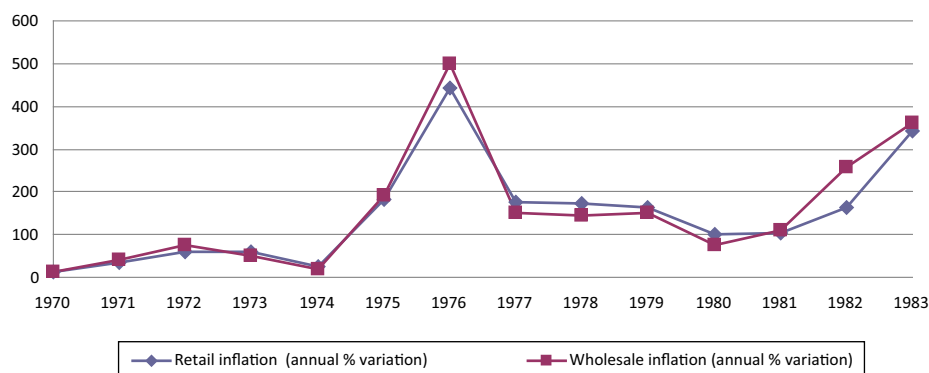


Figure 2.
Wholesale
inflation/retail
inflation

of the game, it was essential to educate the consumer to adjust their behavior and their expectations to a free and competitive market (Ministerio de Economía, 1979b, p. 1).

Before moving on to the particularities of this campaign, it is relevant to review some of the new approaches to the history of consumption. As was stated at the beginning, the rise of neoliberalism produced new discourses about how consumers should exercise their freedom as free and rational agents of the market (Winch, 2006). Liberalization policies and a discourse portraying consumers as selfish individuals generated a pessimistic reaction in the academic field, already questioning the emergent consumerism. The low opinion of consumerism soon spread to the political arena. The sociological approach in particular argued that this new reality promoted consumers alienation, motivating them to find happiness by purchasing goods and services. In this sense, the pessimistic vision affirmed that there existed a strong opposition between the idea of citizenship linked to the common good and the new society based on a selfish and individualistic consumer identity (Sennet, 2006). As Mark Bevir and Frank Trentmann state, this dichotomy was the key to sustaining the idea of the market and the state as “forms of social coordination”. In the first case, the market is the only force that can coordinate all the preferences of rational market agents. In the second case, the state is the only actor capable of governing the “logic of appropriateness” of consumers (Bevir and Trentmann, 2007, p. 182).

In the same article, Trentmann and Bevir bypass this simplistic dichotomy, promoting a new approach. For them, it is a mistake to consider consumers as an object purely determined by consumerist ideology or like a free agent without any attachments. Against that, they suggest the idea of “local reasoning”, according to which, agents are rational but in relation with a “consistent belief”, that does not necessarily imply the utility-maximizing theory embraced by the neoliberal economic approach. In their account, agency should be situated, given that choices are always located within inherited traditions and cultures. As a consequence, this “local reasoning approach” questions the existence of a pre-determined manner in which agents could act. Thus, it opens the door to history: if agency must be situated, it is important not only to study different consumer actions and how they changed through time but also the network of beliefs that explains their consistency (Bevir and Trentmann, 2007, p. 174). For her part, and as an exponent of this new approach, Lizabeth Cohen states that, since the birth of the modern state, the categories of consumer and citizen keep relating to each other in an unstable way, sometimes in opposition, but many times overlapping and complementing each other (Cohen, 2001, p. 203).

Of course, the study of consumer organizations remains at the heart of this perspective. Matthew Hilton has promoted the study of this kind of organization in a recent book, arguing that it is possible to find there a proper definition of consumer societies and expressions of consumer subjectivity. In this sense, his research focuses on the emergence of consumer organizations, especially in the second half of the twentieth century, in the middle of what he calls the era of affluence. During those decades, the expansion of consumer movements and related state institutions took place along with ideas about collective rights and access to markets. While choice remained a mechanism to promote fairer prices, it was only part of a wider perspective underlining the importance of certain standards of living and the fulfillment of basic needs (Hilton, 2009, p. 15). However, while for decades the consumer movement made progress in the fight for the recognition of consumer

rights, the past decades of the twentieth century has seen the rise of a narrower vision of consumer protection. In this process, the individual right to choice and information became the crucial demand of most consumer bodies. Nowhere was there any consideration for those excluded from consumer society and market access (Hilton, 2009, pp. 73-74).

These two different moments in the history of consumer organizations can be seen in Argentina, too. When Peron assumed the presidency in 1946, he consecrated an important effort to associate a specific consumer identity with a new definition of citizenship. Eduardo Elena has analyzed how a new notion of citizenship was defined, linked to improvement in the standard of living and, as a result, to certain patterns of consumption. He underlined the successful attempts of Peronism to reformulate the existing debates in the country concerning workers' living conditions and their relationship with economic growth. In that sense, Peronism's focus on the topic found its fullest expression in the defense of the workers' *vida digna*, translated into an institutional framework dedicated to guaranteeing the democratization of general welfare. As a consequence, the increase in the range of social services together with a remarkable growth of the workers' purchasing power also implied a reformulation of consumers' expectations. Thus, while consumers were portrayed in state discourse as economic agents and fundamental for the support of the political and economic project, the same agents were also beginning to present their own demands. In this way, democratization of social welfare produced two new realities: on the one hand, some economic elements that used to be regulated by market mechanisms were now under the purview of the state; on the other hand, state agents tried to compel normal citizens to become more actively involved in national problems, but mobilized specifically as economic agents (Elena, 2011). Natalia Milanesio, in a recent book, has focused on the meanings involved in this new kind of working class participation in mass consumption. The Peronist years in Argentina not only changed the national economy, making industrial planning a central goal, but also consolidated the identity of the working class through its consumption practices. Taking into account their new purchasing power and the new goods they could afford, Argentine workers had their own experience as consumers and inserted themselves into the mass consumption market, compelling a redefinition of middle-class consumption patterns, places of commerce, senses related to shopping and even advertising (Milanesio, 2013).

The idea that consumers were connected to national destiny and the role of workers were, in Daniel Fridman's perspective, one of the main obstacles that Martínez de Hoz would attempt to remove. Applying a Foucauldian governmentality perspective, Fridman analyzes the last Argentine dictatorship and looks at some of the mechanisms producing two key social identities intended to replace the more traditional worker identity: consumers and investors. This initiative would be motivated by the necessity to create a change of mentality favoring the existence of a self-governing and independent consumer. In other words, they wanted to consolidate the figure of the *homo economicus* – a relevant concept in the liberal tradition – as an instrument suited for the free market economy, a figure already brought about by the reforms of economists and technocrats linked to Martínez de Hoz. This implied a series of state policies that Fridman considers as performative devices, their purpose being to shape new social subjects articulated to the economic sphere, like the previously mentioned OPEC campaign. Thus, from his perspective, during those years, both consumer and

investor identities replaced the worker identity, associated with the idea of citizenship as something collective (Fridman, 2008, 2010).

But, what was the campaign all about? A few months after he left the Ministry, Martínez de Hoz expressed his thoughts on the campaign in these terms:

Given the need to adapt mentalities to the modern economy, since 1978 we have campaigned to orient and educate consumers. The purpose of the campaign was to raise consciousness about the role that each person in the country played as a consumer, and to give them better information about the price variations in different products (Martínez de Hoz, 1981, p. 121).

The government had to promote the emergence of a new kind of consumer, capable of entering the market without state protection. As a result, between December 1978 and March 1981, the Ministry published bulletins and distributed them in state dependencies and schools. The entire collection was directed by Ana María Luro Rivarola, the Ministry Press Secretary since the 1960s. The bulletins appeared every two weeks and only stopped when Martínez de Hoz left the economic department. The only reference to the print run for the bulletins is found in the above-mentioned book of memories of the Minister. He held that even though they started printing 20,000 copies, they quickly started printing around 340,000 copies, delivered all through “Provincial and Municipal Governments, intermediate institutions, distribution mediums and mainly schools and scholarly cooperatives from all around the country” (Martínez de Hoz, 1981, p. 123). Most of them had the same structure: they had an editorial on the front page, offering a theoretical reflection on the importance of being informed as consumers or on other economic matters. Then, there followed a set of short articles that could be divided into four groups:

- (1) those dedicated to all the considerations a consumer should take into account when buying products;
- (2) articles presenting studies of how prices might vary across different shops and neighborhoods;
- (3) studies comparing different brands of the same product; and
- (4) articles concerning family economies, stimulating savings and new ways to handle their budgets.

Finally, on the back cover, there were short testimonials of individual experiences sent to the bulletin’s commercial mailbox, always describing cases of unfair commercial practices (Pryluka, 2015).

Apart from those bulletins, in September 1980, both Economy and Education Ministries formed an Inter-Ministerial Commission. In one of its first meetings, the representatives of 22 provinces established a foundational document where they affirmed that:

The consumer issue not only concerns the basic knowledge of resources that run an economy, the proper use of services and products, greater community awareness about the need for access to culture and comfort, all advantages that the inhabitants of this country should experience; it also includes the duty for responsible action and the solidarity needed to achieve all this. Nobody can be freed from this duty, God has given us too much, and we have no right to complain, regret, or look for a scapegoat, if everybody contributes his active presence in society (Ministerio de Economía, 1980c, pp. 1-2).

As we can observe, the initiative focused on stimulating independent behavior in consumers, promoting rational choices and responsible action, comparing prices and penalizing those businesses who gave unfair treatment. That is to say:

We promote and encourage all the population to assume the consumer role. It is undeniable that this is directly related to the use of liberty and accordingly, the responsible use of freedom should have an active presence to obtain better standards of living, not only as an individual but as a family and community (Ministerio de Economía, 1980c, pp. 1-2).

With this purpose in mind, the new Commission worked especially on education for consumers, organizing two kinds of activities. First, they promoted the inclusion of the subject matter in the school curriculum. Second, they worked to train teachers on consumer education by organizing several courses. At the same time, the Inter-Ministerial Commission published a journal called “Consumer Education” that promoted scholarly exercises and pedagogic activities related to consumption. From 1981 to 1983, the Commission distributed more than 150,000 bulletins for each issue. In addition, consumer issues were incorporated in the school curriculum in at least three provinces: Santa Fe, Buenos Aires and Misiones (Ministerio de Economía, 1980a, pp. 2-3; 1981a, p. 19; 1981b, pp. 4-5).

In this context, the deep political and economic transformations that took place after the *coup d’État* were accompanied by key changes in the role of the consumer in the economy and in the shaping of citizenship. Therefore, if Peronism had created a model of citizenship associated with economic welfare and with the consumer as the pillar of national development, Martínez de Hoz and his team were determined to reformulate these ties in terms similar to what Hilton has called the “narrowing” vision of the consumer movement: the power of choice as the main consumer right.

Adelco on the scene

As previously mentioned, between 1980 and 1993 Adelco was the only consumer organization in Argentina, while the number increased to 11 between 1993 and 1997 (República Argentina, Secretaría de Comercio, 2013). In fact, as an expert institution, Adelco advised both congressmen and constituents when the new consumer law and the constitutional reform of 1994 took place. Also, during the 1990s, Adelco played an important role in questioning the privatization of telephone companies. In her research on social movements, Sybil Rhodes holds that consumer organizations in Latin America appeared as the combined result of democratization and economic reforms, together with the influence of local and international activist, all within the context of a decline in the power of the labor movement (Rhodes, 2006, p. 37). In this section, the case of Adelco will be used to assess this opinion by analyzing four dimensions of the organization: its origins, its main activities, its structure and its international connections.

On December 16, 1980, Adelco appeared on the local scene as the first non-governmental or political consumer defense organization. The bulletin of the OPEC campaign referred to its foundation in the following way:

“The founding Commission proclaimed the birth of this private, non-profit organization at the Lyons Club (Club de Leones, in Spanish). There, Ms Enriqueta P. De Vicien, Mr Enzo Pellizzari and Monsignor Moledo made statements. Moledo lectured about “A better quality of life” (Ministerio de Economía, 1980d, p. 3).

In the same meeting, all the new members[4] of the association adhered to a foundational act, where they rehearsed the organization's main aims. Taking the consumer back to the center of the free market economy, they would have several goals:

[...] to unite consumers in order to assume their responsibilities in a modern society; to promote their interest through a better knowledge and awareness of their activities in a free market economy; to make access to a better quality of life possible through the responsible use of resources; and to strengthen their freedom of choice (Ministerio de Economía, 1980d, p. 4).

In addition, in the same foundational act, there was a direct reference to the Consumer Education campaign, as we can see, (Adelco) “will organize activities to collaborate with consumer education and will collaborate with and support school education as promoted by the Inter-Ministerial Commission of Consumer Education” (Ministerio de Economía, 1980d, p. 4).

The participants of this first meeting were members of different organizations already in existence: Liga de Amas de Casa, Liga de Madres de Familia, Club de Leones, Consejo de Coordinaciones de Obras Privadas, Asociación Argentina de Ecónomas y Gastrónomas, Misiones Rurales Argentina and the Rotary Club[5]. A few days later, on December 22, 1980, the same participants got together again to have their first formal gathering, to choose all responsible authorities and approve the statute. It was there where María Enriqueta Piangiarelli de Vicien was elected president and Lucía Pegasano de Pascual became vice president (Adelco, *Minutes of the Board of Directors Meeting*, p. 1). However, on their fourth meeting, celebrated on May 20, 1981, we find the name of Ana María Luro Rivarola for the first time among the participants. She started the OPEC campaign as director three years earlier (Adelco, *Minutes*, p. 4). In fact, on July 21, 1981, she was appointed Executive Coordinator of Adelco (Adelco, *Minutes*, p. 7). It was Lucía Pegasano de Pascual who pointed out that Luro Rivarola had played a key role in the foundation of Adelco and invited her to organize the new institution. As she tells us:

The issue of consumers did not exist in Argentina. It was Martínez de Hoz who put it into effect [...]. But Ana María [Luro], who had a vision for the future, said, “if there is no NGO that takes care of this, we don't know if the next government will be interested in it or not” (personal interview with Lucía Pegasano de Pascual).

From her position at the Ministry and already with experience in consumer issues, Luro Rivarola thought that it was crucial to organize a new NGO to preserve her work. Nevertheless, she initially decided not to occupy a public position at the organization due to the close ties she had with Martínez de Hoz. In fact, before he left the Ministry and when political repression had diminished, his name became associated with the bloody crimes of the military government. As Lucía Pegasano de Pascual states, for that same reason, Luro Rivarola did not appear in the records of Adelco's first meetings (personal interview with Lucía Pegasano de Pascual). In any case, it is relevant to stress that when her name finally appeared, both Rivarola and Martínez de Hoz had already left the Ministry of Economy[6]. As we can see, the linkage between Martínez de Hoz's administration and the origins of Adelco seems to be relevant.

In regard to Adelco's original inspirations, there were both local and international sources. At the local level, it was the Argentine economist Juan Carlos de Pablo who influenced Adelco in the first years. De Pablo was well-known at the time for his media appearances where he discussed economic matters and for his writings, where he explained this subject in a simple and didactic way to a mass audience[7]. He also was an

early exponent of the liberal economic tradition in Argentina (Heredia, 2004, p. 327). It was De Pablo who not only gave presentations about different subjects in Adelco but also advised the institution on new initiatives (Adelco, *Minutes*, p. 11 and p. 55). Another inspiration, Vilma Ellemberg was several times invited to give presentations and organize seminars about consumer issues (Adelco, *Minutes*, p. 34 and p. 58). Ellemberg was an Argentine specialist in consumer defense who lived in New York and worked in the Consumer Services Division of that city (Ministerio de Economía, 1980b, p. 5). In addition, she had already played a key role in the organization of the Inter-Ministerial Commission that elaborated the Consumer Education bulletins from 1982 to 1983 (Ministerio de Economía, 1980b, p. 6). Before Luro Rivarola began to direct the OPEC campaign, Martínez de Hoz had sent her to research and learn about consumer institutions and organizations in Europe for approximately three weeks. Even if the details of that trip are unclear, we know for certain that she had been to Germany, where she established contact with the *Stiftung Warentest*, a well known consumer organization (personal interview with Claudia Collado). This visit, promoted by Martínez de Hoz himself and funded by the Ministry of Economy, is closely linked to the institution's origins.

With regard to the initial activities of Adelco, they can be classified into four groups. First, Adelco began to publish a monthly bulletin that had information for consumers and was very similar to those produced by the OPEC campaign. Despite the original name of *The Consumer's Bulletin*, it quickly adopted another one: *The Consumer's Eye*. Even if it is difficult to estimate how many were published with each issue, in the late date of September 1985, 6,000 copies were distributed (Adelco, *Minutes*, p. 61). Second, Adelco took education as one of its crucial activities. This, of course, found different expressions. For example, some members of Adelco worked together with the Inter-Ministerial Commission for Consumer Education (Adelco, *Minutes*, p. 14 and p. 33). But there were also other initiatives, such as training school teachers on consumer issues (Adelco, *Minutes*, p. 15), sending agents to give lectures in different Argentine provinces (Adelco, *Minutes*, p. 28) or participating in industrial and commercial conferences (Adelco, *Minutes*, p. 35, p. 46 and p. 49). Third, Adelco kept the regular practice of publishing comparative consumer guides, including them in *The Consumer's Eye* or separately. Finally, they offered legal advice and orientation on cases involving unfair trade or dishonest commercial practices.

The structure of Adelco developed slowly during its first years of existence. It is difficult to estimate the initial size and influence of Adelco, as there is no reliable information about the number of associates they had at the beginning – the only reference we have is that they aspired to 300 associates by June 1982 (Adelco, *Minutes*, p. 24). Despite that fact, its peak was in 1991, when they had almost 14,000 associates (Clarín, 2002, p. 20). The number of branches that Adelco had outside Buenos Aires offers another parameter to take into account. In 1985, they had only managed to establish one branch, in the city of Rosario (Adelco, *Minutes*, p. 64). Even if in the following years they opened three more branches – one in Tucumán province and two in Santa Fe province – Adelco never had a national presence in Argentina.

Concerning Adelco's finances, no such information appears in any of the institution's balance sheets, so it is almost impossible to be sure about the resources it drew on. Still, there is some evidence indicating how Adelco grew during its first years. For example, we know that in October 1983, they hired a secretary, an office assistant and several

pollsters (Adelco, *Minutes*, p. 28). Two years later, in May 1985, they were able to send Luro Rivarola on another trip to Europe to contact other consumer associations (Adelco, *Minutes*, p. 57). Furthermore, Adelco changed its office three times in its first six years of existence, something that could suggest a growing budget and an expansion in their activities (Adelco, *Minutes*, p. 14 and p. 37). In fact, in October 1984, they changed offices because the new one allowed them to “organize meetings, conferences with room for enough people. It had two telephone lines and its offices allowed all the personnel to work comfortably” (Adelco, *Minutes*, p. 52). Focusing on their sources of finance, they received, in addition to membership fees, a number of public and private donations. For example, a short time after its foundation, Adelco had a meeting with the new Commerce Secretary, Alberto de las Carreras, where he offered a state subsidy (Adelco, *Minutes*, p. 6)[8]. We also discover that foundations linked to big companies or banks such as Oikos Foundation and Bank of Boston Foundation had contributed to Adelco’s finances (Adelco, *Minutes*, p. 17 and p. 28).

Finally, Adelco’s international connections were built a few years after its foundation. On April 18th 1983, it was accepted as a member of Consumers International – known as International Organization of Consumers Union at the time – an organization that gathered together independent consumer organizations all over the world (Adelco, *Minutes*, p. 32). During the 1980s, visits by experts of Consumers International were regular, both to organize lectures and to consult Adelco’s directors.

At this point, we can briefly summarize some central points regarding Adelco’s emergence. On the one hand, we find a clear and direct relation between the founding initiatives of Adelco and the focus and efforts that Martínez de Hoz’s team dedicated to consumer issues. Even if it is impossible to establish if those first initiatives came from Martínez de Hoz himself or from Luro Rivarola, it is fairly apparent that Adelco would not have emerged at the time without the support of the Ministry and the state funds spent on traveling, publishing and other activities. In fact, the spirit, the goals and the concerns of the OPEC campaign were virtually the same as those of Adelco. On the other hand, considering both the activities it realized and the range of actions it took, it is easy to conclude that Adelco did not have a grass-root organization strategy. At the same time, Adelco fought for the legal recognition of consumers in Argentina and was involved in the elaboration of a new juridical framework that for the first time began to protect consumer rights in the 1990s. Thus, it played, at least in its first years, a more technical and professional role.

Conclusion

This article proposed to study the emergence of Adelco, the first strictly non-governmental consumer organization in Argentina. To support the relevance of the subject, it reviewed the unique origins of the institution and the key role played by Adelco during the 1990s. In doing so, it presented the more general political context of the era, as well as the consumer politics applied just before the organization’s foundation.

Adelco presented itself and acted as an NGO not only during the 1990s but also since its appearance in 1980. At the same time, as was shown, it united the activity of several organizations worried about consumer issues, even if they had other purposes. In fact, almost all its founders brought with them previous experiences from other civil society organizations. In addition, as Luro Rivarola travels proved, it was influenced by foreign

consumer organizations and, from 1983, was linked to Consumers International, maintaining that relation during the ensuing years. However, its foundation cannot be separated from initiatives originating in the Argentine state and from the OPEC campaign. As was already pointed out, the role played by the Minister of Economy was crucial not only for giving general relevance to consumer issues and education but also, in particular, for encouraging the birth of Adelco. The proof of this is in the actors involved, the activities carried out and the spirit and main goals proposed. As a result, this article states that the emergence of this civil society organization, despite its latter performance as an NGO, had an evident top-down origin.

The only task remaining is to summarize Hilton's analysis of consumer organizations. As previously stated, Hilton has shown the transformation in consumer rights during the second half of the twentieth century from a more holistic view, worried about standards of living and basic needs, to a narrower perspective centered on the question of individual choice. Considering these different approaches, it seems that both the OPEC campaign and the foundation of Adelco promoted a more narrow vision of what the consumer rights should be, closer to the aim of preserving consumer choice in the marketplace than anything else. Of course, this cannot be evaluated outside the more general context of the economic reforms proposed by Martínez de Hoz. In his fight for an empowered consumer, the notion of *homo economicus* was key for the development of a free market economy. In that sense, even if it is hard to measure the impact of the OPEC campaign, certainly the persistence of Adelco was a concrete result that would last for the following decades.

Notes

1. In Argentina, Adelco was the first organization dedicated exclusively to consumer problems. Before 1980, consumer issues featured on the agenda of certain institutions that might differ in two ways from the aforementioned organization: there, consumption was a secondary organizational objective, or consumption was one of several topics addressed by political parties. For more research on the subject, see the works of Rocchi (1998), Elena (2007, 2011), Milanesio (2013) and Aguilar (2014).
2. This crisis should be understood in the context of the deep transformations occurring in the global market. These transformations started with the 1973 oil crisis and would deeply alter certain aspects of the international economy. In one of his latest books, Harvey (2005) presents an explanation of this process (2005).
3. It is worth pointing out that the consequence of this national rebirth project was the practice of state terrorism and the massacre not only of *guerrilla* movements that existed in Argentina at the time but also thousands of Peronist and left-wing political activists (Novaro and Palermo, 2011, pp. 106-123).
4. For the purpose of this paper, it is important to distinguish here between members and associates: the former maintained active participation in Adelco while the latter paid a monthly fee that gave them the right to free legal advice and a subscription to the magazine *Consumer's Eye* (Adelco, 1980, pp. 3-5).
5. As it is clear, the origins of Adelco had nothing to do with an "offshoot of a small conservative party", as Rhodes suggested (Rhodes, 2006, p. 73).

6. The release of Martínez de Hoz from the Ministry took place in the midst of a presidential transition between military figures: Roberto Viola replaced Jorge Rafael Videla on March 29, 1981. Lorenzo Sigaut was appointed Minister of Economy.
7. In spite of that fact, he had an academic background in the Catholic University of Argentina and later he was funded by the Ford Foundation to do postgraduate studies at Harvard University (Heredia, 2004, p. 327).
8. Claudia Collado related in a personal interview that during the early 1990s, they received a one million dollar donation from Domingo Cavallo, who at the time was Minister of Economy.

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