

## Domestic Hierarchies: Household Workers and Middle-class Employers in Buenos Aires, 1956–1976

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In Argentina, substantial changes took place in domestic service since the beginning of the Twentieth Century, such as the decreasing number of workers per household, the gradual shift towards the coexistence of live-in and live-out arrangements, the sanction of a legal code that protected household workers' rights, etc. These transformations gave way to new conflicts that revolved around domestic employees' "inadequate" skills and knowledge and their "improper" use of the home. If the presence of a domestic employee guaranteed the social status of the family that employed one, "inappropriate" behavior could also call this status into question. By analyzing the employers' responses to their former employees demands filed at the Tribunal of Domestic Work between 1956 and 1976, I explore the ways in which the work carried out by domestic employees and their presence in the employers' home were part of the construction of social hierarchies.

Those housewives who can boast having had the same staff for years are a rare and enviable breed. Today it is quite normal to have a total stranger in your house whom you have to explain your habits and customs to, often teaching them how to work... only to then hear the words 'I'm leaving.' So the housewife has to pretend not to mind, pay her now ex-maid her salary, her bonus, place a new advertisement in the paper... and then once again open the doors of her house to a total stranger, hand over the keys, entrust her children to her, and start the whole arduous

business over, hoping to have better luck this time round. Why is this happening? Why don't staff stay, and why don't they get attached to you like they used to?

The August 1964 issue of *Claudia*, one of the most popular Argentine women's magazines of the 1960s and 1970s, aimed at middle-class female readers, included an article entitled "The housewife's 'perennial problem'," which addressed an issue that middle-class women often faced: finding domestic service staff.<sup>2</sup> Housewives didn't only complain about the lack of available staff, but also, fundamentally, about the difficulties in finding suitable employees who stayed on. They insisted that applicants "thought of nothing but going out;" were "dirty and didn't know how to cook. [They thought] that

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<sup>2</sup>Various researchers have observed that in the 1950s, newspapers and magazines were the main source of reading material for the middle class, which in the 1960s would lead to a new boom in the cultural industries, in connection with the creation of new consumer habits. *Claudia*, published by Abril, was novel in terms of both its contents and its format. It was printed on high-quality paper and included a large number of illustrations in relation to text. The issues it covered and the sources it made reference to suggest a target reader from the middle class who was up-to-date on the latest trends in terms of both fashion and other forms of cultural consumption. The magazine covered issues of interest to this reader, from divorce and paid work for women, to the difficulties of finding "suitable" staff. It was an expensive magazine, more so, for example, than *Para ti*, its main competitor, although *Para ti* was published weekly while *Claudia* came out monthly. Despite this price difference, *Claudia* became the most popular women's magazine in Argentina in the 1960s and 1970s (Cosse, 2011).

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"The housewife's 'perennial problem': domestic servants," ["El "eterno problema" del ama de casa: El servicio doméstico"] *Claudia*, August 1964. inesp18@yahoo.com

knowing how to make a cottage pie or an omelet was enough to say that they could work as cooks"; they were ungrateful, disloyal, and behaved in ways that were an affront to decency.<sup>3</sup> The most problematic issue, as can be seen in the extract above, was managing to keep on employees that employers had already trained to their liking. In the employers' eyes, although working conditions for service staff had improved "infinitely" in recent years—thanks to labor-saving "electrical appliances" and the good treatment and "rather high salaries" that housewives gave their employees in an attempt to "keep them on"—affection and loyalty towards the employers' family were hard to find.<sup>4</sup>

This article in *Claudia* returned to a topic that often arose in different publications aimed at middle-class women in Argentina in the mid-twentieth century, which described the "undesirable consequences" of some of the changes that had been taking place in the world of domestic service (Pérez, 2013). Indeed, since the beginning of the century, those employed in the sector had gone from being mainly immigrants from overseas to migrants from other parts of the country, a change that went hand-in-hand with a feminization of the sector, not only in terms of the number of women employed in it but also through the separation of "service" from other more specialized—and masculinized—occupations (Pérez, 2015). The reduction in the number of employees per household, often middle-class households, and the gradual shift towards the coexistence of live-in and live-out arrangements were other transformations in domestic service at this time (Cárdenas, 1986; Gogna, 1989).

The sanction of Decree-Law 326 in 1956 was another major landmark. Although the conditions it contained regarding those who could seek protection under it were restrictive, and its guarantees were also more limited than those established at the same time for other workers, it constituted the first legal scheme providing protection for household workers.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup>"The housewife's 'perennial problem'..." *op. cit.*

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup>Decree-Law 326 stipulated that only those who worked a minimum of four hours a day, four days a week for the same employer could seek protection

The same year saw the creation of the Domestic Labor Council (later renamed the Tribunal of Domestic Work, hereafter TDW), an administrative court that depended on the Ministry of Labor and which was responsible for solving conflicts that arose between employers and domestic employees. These two factors contributed to the emergence of new notions of justice in relation to this work, providing employees with a state entity before which they could lodge complaints while simultaneously conjuring up the specter of a possible lawsuit among employers (Pérez y Canevaro, 2015).

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under it. This limit left those who did not meet this minimum requirement outside the legal protection established by this regulation. Furthermore, the rights that the decree recognized were limited. Among other things, domestic workers were not entitled to maternity leave, and only had the right to thirty days of sick leave per year. They were also excluded from the occupational hazards regime, which by that time covered male and female workers in different sectors. Live-in workers had longer working days and weeks than other workers, even those who had been considered part of the domestic service staff until not long before, such as private chauffeurs. Although draft bills for the legal regulation of this sector had existed since the start of the twentieth century, only in 1955 was one of these passed by one of Argentina's two legislative chambers, a process that was then halted by the military coup and subsequent dictatorship known as the *Revolución Libertadora*. Some rights, such as the annual bonus or premium pay, had already been granted to domestic workers (who were incorporated into the annual bonus regime in 1946). Decree-Law 326 constituted the first legal scheme for workers in the sector, however. All the same, up to now, domestic service has largely taken place under informal arrangements, which reduces the chances of workers being able to exercise the rights to which they are legally entitled and having access to justice (Valenzuela and Mora, 2009; Tizziani, 2013; Pérez, 2015). Furthermore, inequality is often observed in the region in relation to the labor rights of other workers. In Latin America, in addition to being the most feminized occupation, domestic service generally entails more vulnerable working conditions than any other job, with labor legislation that excludes it from the rights that are guaranteed to other workers, high levels of informality, and low salaries, though this has partially changed recently (Chaney and García Castro, 1989; Blofield, 2012).

In this context, “the housewife’s perennial problem” garnered particular connotations. The transformations described above gave way to new conflicts that revolved around domestic employees’ “inadequate” skills and knowledge and their “improper” use of the home, which, from the employers’ perspective, was a threat to the wellbeing of their families, their privacy, and public respectability. If the presence of a domestic employee guaranteed the social status of the family that employed one, “inappropriate” behavior could also call this status into question, especially at a time marked by a destabilization of social hierarchies.

Different researchers have observed that the “democratization of wellbeing” (Torre and Pastoriza, 2002) that is identified with Peronism in Argentina gave rise to a middle-class identity that was articulated around the fears aroused by the destabilization of social distances (Adamovsky, 2009, Garguin, 2012). For their middle-class employers, domestic employees embodied the new social position that workers had attained under Perón (Milanesio, 2014). Their presence in the home was an instance of both production and reproduction of class, gender, and ethnic hierarchies, and a permanent reminder of the new tensions experienced by the middle class. If deferent attitudes among domestic workers guaranteed such hierarchies, then “inappropriate” behavior was a threat not only to the employers’ wellbeing, but also to their public respectability, and thus to their class identity.

These conflicts, which stretched beyond Perón’s time in office and came to characterize the mid-twentieth century, have left many marks. Those that can be observed in the proceedings begun before the TDW, established in 1956, are some of the most interesting.<sup>6</sup> Employers’ responses to the

complaints filed by household workers repeatedly include accusations of improper behavior. In this article, I focus on those practices described as being inappropriate, in connection with workers’ insufficient skills or knowledge, their immoral conduct, the presence of strangers in the employers’ home, and different forms in which workers were described as breaking employers’ trust. By analyzing the cases filed at the TDW, I will explore the ways in which the work carried out by domestic employees and their presence in the employers’ home were part of the construction of social hierarchies.

As different studies have shown (Rollins, 1985; Romero, 2002; Tiziani and Gorbán, 2014), deference is one of the key factors in the relationships established through domestic service. Part of domestic employees’ work consists of playing a part. Regardless of the image they might actually have of themselves, they have to place themselves in a position of social inferiority vis-à-vis their employers. The sense of superiority that was constructed

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cases begun by workers predominated. Legal counsel was optional, so in many cases workers went to the court, at least initially, without a lawyer. The complaint (through which a worker usually claimed overdue wages, severance pay, or compensation for vacations not taken, etc.) was followed by various conciliation hearings between workers, employers, and representatives of the court. When an agreement could not be reached, the case went to trial. These are the cases that are the richest sources of information on both the parties and the relationship between them. Although in many records it is impossible to pinpoint the employers’ social origins, in many others there are factors that suggest that a large proportion of the employers accused before the court were of middle-class origin, such as the professions they declared, the descriptions of their homes, and their alleged inability to afford what workers claimed to be owed. There are some records from the 1950s and 1960s that are unusual in that they suggest a relative closeness between the socioeconomic position of some employers and the employees filing complaints against them. The strategy that can be observed in these cases—one used by both workers and employers—consisted of passing the employee off as a lodger. The mere fact that this was a possibility suggests that the employers in question could hardly be members of the elite or the wealthier sectors of society. For a more detailed analysis of these cases, see (Pérez y Canevaro, 2015).

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<sup>6</sup> From its establishment, the TDW depended on Argentina’s Ministry of Labor, and was a court of conciliation that consisted of different counselors, a secretary, and a president. It had jurisdiction over conflicts arising in relation to domestic service that originated in the city of Buenos Aires. Proceedings began with a statement or the filing of a complaint, either on the part of workers (both men and women, although most were women) or employers (an almost even mix of men and women), although

through this relationship was particularly important for middle-class employers in the decades that followed the social transformations that began during Juan Domingo Perón's first term in office, when other factors that had hitherto guaranteed their social status (such as the consumption of certain goods) had also become accessible to the working classes. As is shown by employer reactions recorded by the TDW, responding to a worker's complaint by claiming that she had been behaving "inappropriately" was both an attempt to neutralize this complaint and also a manifestation of the discomfort the middle class was experiencing as a result of the changes that were taking place in relations with domestic service staff, and, more generally, in the social hierarchies beyond the bounds of the domestic sphere.

The analysis I present here draws from a careful reading of 629 complaints filed before the TDW between 1956 and 1976. On the basis of this reading, I sought to identify recurring patterns in the behavior of workers that employers described as being reprehensible, choosing cases that best illustrate this. I focused on the first two decades of the TDW's operation because, despite the peculiarities of each case, there is a certain uniformity to them and they span a relatively consistent period in terms of the dynamics of the proceedings that the court in question followed.

The article is divided into three sections, which examine three tropes that emerge in the discourse of employers before the TDW: the shortage of service staff, "angry" or "disrespectful" answers on the part of workers, and the identification of employees as being "immoral" women. As I will show, each of these tropes reflects different changes in domestic service that took place in the mid-twentieth century Argentina and reveals the discomfort and concern that these changes brought about among employers.

### The Shortage of Domestic Service Staff

The great drama is published every day. It appears in the monotonous small print of the classifieds. Domestic servants: two hundred positions vacant, twenty seeking employment.

The list of positions is always increasing; wages rise, and job requirements are reduced to unbelievable pleas for help. [...] We talked to the other side, the girls... We've seen how they throw themselves almost desperately after a factory job. Why is there this mismatch between two needs that could easily complement one another?<sup>7</sup>

The "great drama" of the middle-class Argentine housewife that *Claudia* magazine refers to in the extract quoted above was the shortage of domestic staff. As is suggested in the article, which was published in January 1961, many employers at the time pointed out the lack of service staff and suggested that this shortage meant that workers had greater powers of negotiation, imposing their own conditions on jobs and "choosing their bosses."<sup>8</sup> Employers also maintained that because of this shortage, they had to put up with workers who were ill equipped to perform their tasks, rude, and disrespectful. From the employers' point of view, the difficulty in finding service staff was connected to the fact that workers preferred to seek employment elsewhere (mainly in factories) as these gave them higher salaries and more free time.

However, although the shortage of household workers had been pointed to repeatedly since at least the 1940s<sup>9</sup>, in 1964 some 16.8 percent of the women who were employed in the city of Buenos Aires and Greater Buenos Aires were domestic employees, which was the sector that employed the largest number of women within the labor market.<sup>10</sup> Although censuses show a

<sup>7</sup>*Claudia*, January 1961.

<sup>8</sup> "Given the way things are at the moment [...] there's a shortage of people in domestic service, [...] they're in a better position to lay down their own conditions and choose who to work for." Record 63/1962.

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, "The servants are leaving: What is happening to domestic staff in Buenos Aires?" *El hogar*, April 4, 1941.

<sup>10</sup> *Employment and unemployment surveys, Buenos Aires, July 1963 and April 1964*, National Institute of Statistics and Censuses, Buenos Aires, 1964.

notable decrease in these numbers in comparison with 1947—which is explained by the emergence of new work opportunities for female workers, particularly within industry (Lobato, 2007)—they continue to underline the importance of the sector: the proportion of women employed in domestic service nationwide went from 30.5 percent in 1947 to 20.5 percent in 1960, 23 percent in 1970, and 20.5 percent in 1980 (Gogna, 1989).

Given this, it is possible that the perceived difficulty in finding a domestic employee was connected to other transformations, such as the spread of work by the hour, the absence of many female employers from their homes, and the expansion of labor rights to include this sector (Cárdenas, 1986; Gogna, 1989). As can be seen in the articles published in *Claudia*, the problem was not just finding staff but finding someone suitable.

Indeed, this was a common complaint among employers reported to the TDW. In the proceedings begun by their former staff, employers made extensive claims regarding what were, from their perspectives, unacceptable misdemeanors on the part of their employees. Indeed, one of the most common sources of conflict was whether or not the former employee had been dismissed without due cause, a factor on which the right to severance pay depended. In the context of these disputes, employers could either deny the dismissal by arguing that workers had resigned voluntarily, describe the behavior that had led them to terminate the position, or combine the two strategies so as to justify the end of the labor relationship. However, this description reveals some of the concerns that the transformations in domestic service in the mid-twentieth century brought about in the middle class.

In 1966, for example, employers who had been reported to the TDW by a worker who was claiming compensation for wrongful dismissal claimed that she had resigned when she got a job in a factory. They also argued that she had not performed her basic duties while she had worked for them:

The plaintiff was often absent and extremely irresponsible with regard to punctuality. She practically came to

work when she felt like it. She never let us know that she would not be coming. She simply did not show up, which created enormous problems, as you can imagine. [...] When both husband and wife go to work and have a daughter who is now eighteen years old, the need for domestic servants to be responsible—especially those who live out and work by the hour—is much greater than in those cases in which the lady of the house is directing and helping the servant—often working even harder than her. [...] But the plaintiff's disloyalty reached even higher levels when she was most needed. Around June or July of this year, when the undersigned was suffering from a grave illness [...] and his wife was in a similarly deplorable state of health, confined to bed for several weeks, the plaintiff had no better idea than to turn her back on the defendants and go to work for the company "Pañuelos Doria," Malabia 1232, Buenos Aires, where she worked for six to eight hours a day. In other words, when the family needed her most, when both husband and wife were gravely ill, the plaintiff walked away from her job, an unspeakable attitude no matter how you look at it.<sup>11</sup>

Unpunctuality and unjustified absences with no prior warning constituted the most flagrant displays of employee irresponsibility. These factors became more important as live-out working arrangements increasingly came to replace live-in ones. By 1980, it is thought that more than 77 percent of household workers no longer lived with their employers, a trend that had been growing since the mid-twentieth century (Gogna, 1989; Cárdenas, 1986). Indeed, the case cited above is interesting in that it reveals some of the tensions that arose with the spread of such arrangements. Unlike the situation in which the worker lived in her employers' home, live-out employment or work by the hour not only implied that she could be absent from work or arrive late, but also gave rise to relations in which, as was expressed in the extract at the start of this article, employees no longer

<sup>11</sup> Record 281/1966.

showed the loyalty and affection that had been associated with domestic service staff in the past, when these lived with the same family for many years. It is significant that in the extract previously cited in this section, the employers did not limit themselves to describing the worker's misdemeanors, but also called her morals into question, recriminating her for having abandoned them "when we needed her most," and stressing the fact that both husband and wife were "gravely ill."

The spread of live-out domestic employment prompted employers to question the quality of their employees' work. As other employers argued, "someone who worked in several houses [could not] work as hard as [they would have done] in just one house."<sup>12</sup> Other employers complained that workers' attention drifted from their work to their own homes. As one employer argued in a complaint filed in 1966, "[the worker] was not in a position to work 10 hours a day in my house because she has four children to look after."<sup>13</sup> It was generally more unusual for live-in employees to be married—although it was occasionally the case and sometimes the husbands also lived in the employers' house. Contrarily, this was much more common among live-out workers. The fact that workers could be married was a source of other conflicts. In 1971, for example, the same employers who had questioned the performance of those working by the hour criticized their former employee for allowing her husband into their home when they were away, even though they had forbidden her from doing so because "he used the bathroom and consumed their liquor, which was generally imported."<sup>14</sup>

Workers' skills were also called into question. Employers tended to say that they had agreed to take on unskilled workers who they had had to train how to carry out the different tasks in the home due to the shortage of available staff, or because they appreciated their honesty. This sort of discourse took up complaints that had been set out in different articles published in women's magazines. In

another article published in *Claudia* in February 1961, these same factors were used to describe the now oft-mentioned "drama" of middle-class Argentine housewives.

But there is something even more awful [than the shortage of domestic staff]: the lack of skills and the unbelievable pretensions of cooks and maids, who are now so scarce as to be almost mythical. We have met ladies who paid a girl a cook's wages even though she didn't know how to cook [...]. We met another lady who had started looking for a suitable maid and settled for a young girl who didn't even know how to use detergent to wash the dishes, for 2800 pesos a month. And applicants ask for higher and higher wages, and are sure they can get them, and can choose what neighborhood they want to work in, what type of house, and even what their employer looks like.<sup>15</sup>

In the case cited above, it was added that the employer was not at home to "direct or assist" the employee at her work. Indeed, although in 1947 women represented 19.8 percent of the economically active population, that proportion increased over the following decades to 21.5 percent in 1960, and 25.3 percent in 1970. Jobs in the service sector became more important for men, but especially so for women. The proportion of women working in the sector grew steadily, and by 1970 women accounted for 60 percent of the workers employed in it (Wainerman, 2007). Furthermore, the end of the 1940s saw the start of a trend that became more pronounced in the 1960s and 1970s wherein middle-class women returned to work after the age of 35 and continued to work until the age of 55 (Torrado, 2003: 213–215). In this context, the absence of the housewife from the home led to new tensions between domestic employers and workers, who spent more time unsupervised, either alone or looking after children and old people.

In another case filed in 1966, for example, an employer who worked outside the home

<sup>12</sup> Record 40/1971.

<sup>13</sup> Record 240/1966.

<sup>14</sup> Record 40/1971.

<sup>15</sup> *Claudia*, "The Drama of Being Served," ["El drama de ser servida"] February 1962, p. 87.

and had a two-year-old daughter complained about how dependent that situation made her on her domestic employee. As she explained in her defense to the complaint filed by her employee, the fact that she had to be absent from her home due to her work had made her rely on the employee so much as to fear losing her.

As I had to be away from home for long hours, I was constantly depressed and couldn't get the accusations that she [the domestic employee] made about the nanny out of my mind, about how the nanny mistreated, insulted, and neglected my two-year-old daughter. That was how she managed to make me sad, anxious, and mistrusting, as she knew that I had no choice but to go out to work, and I spent the whole time thinking about what she [the domestic employee] said about 'the nannies' (as I had to keep changing them because of what she said). That was how she managed to make me afraid that she would stop working for me.<sup>16</sup>

The employer's discourse reveals the tensions caused by their dependence on the employee. According to the employer, her domestic employee had managed to convince her that the series of nannies she had hired mistreated and neglected her daughter, making her "sad, anxious, and mistrusting." As she didn't know exactly what was going on in her home, the employer complained about having let herself be swayed by the worker, who had become her eyes and ears in the hours she was out of the house. This situation had become even worse when the employer and her husband had separated, as her reliance on her employee had increased even more.

The growing share of middle-class women in the labor market had given rise to transformations in gender relations inside homes. In this context, household workers had come to occupy a more central role in the family dynamic, as "replacements" for housewives. The presence of a female employee in the home ensured that the person responsible for domestic labor and caring was

a woman, without calling into question the traditional sexual division of labor—at least within the home. However, in the eyes of some employers, such as the one cited in the above example, the increasing prominence of domestic employees was a source of concern, particularly because many of them were not supervised by the owner of the house and were relative "strangers." Given this point of view, the difficulty of establishing a relationship of trust with the worker combined with the sense of a shortage of domestic staff, which allowed workers to increase their demands concerning their working conditions.

### **Lack of Respect, Disobedience, and "Angry" Replies**

Among the permissible causes for dismissing an employee, the law included "threats to the safety, honor, or interests of the employer or their family."<sup>17</sup> As a result, in the face of demands for severance pay, many employers claimed they had been mistreated or insulted by their erstwhile employees. In other cases, workers' refusal to obey their former employers' orders was presented as a justification for terminating the labor relationship. Disobedience and insults were usually presented as being part of the same reprehensible attitude on the part of workers, whose "angry" responses characterized them as being defiant, rather than submissive.

In 1960, for example, when a former employee filed a claim for severance pay, the employer sustained that

[when the employer] asked her to serve dinner [...], she [the worker] not only did not do as she was asked [...] but served food that had been made another day. When he [the employer] complained and then waited patiently for a long time, she brought out an unacceptable snack. The same thing happened with the following dishes, which were brought out without seasoning, etc. [...] When he [the employer] drew attention to her behavior, she [the worker] answered angrily, raising her voice and using

<sup>16</sup>Record 284/1966.

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*

insulting language, showing absolutely no respect for him.<sup>18</sup>

The same situation arose in a complaint filed in 1966, where the employer claimed that he had dismissed the worker because she had repeatedly “misbehaved” by talking back, complaining, or refusing to obey orders. According to the employer, these practices had been part of a deliberate strategy on the part of the worker so that she would be fired and thus have the right to severance pay.

Some new examples of the plaintiff’s misbehavior include the fact that she refused to serve people who came to visit, saying that she had no obligation to make coffee for strangers, etc.; she did not tell the defendants about the telephone calls they received while they were away; she talked back and constantly complained about the house. Now that this unfounded claim has been filed, it is clear that what the plaintiff wanted was to provoke her dismissal so as to be able to ask for severance pay and go to work at another house that she was more interested in. However, this tactic failed, partly out of apathy and partly because the defendants believed she would improve and was simply going through a bad time; partly because she had worked for the defendants for many years; and partly because they were afraid to change and end up with a worse servant; for all these reasons, no decision was made. Finally, at seven o’clock in the morning of June 4, when I got up, I saw that she had not washed any of the dirty dishes from the night before, which was something she had never done before. I pointed this out to her politely, telling her that she couldn’t leave the crockery like that, and she answered that she was fed up and was leaving the house. Much to our surprise, she then packed her bags and left. The undersigned, Mrs. de G., tried to dissuade her from leaving, asking her to think carefully about what she was

doing after having worked for the family for so many years, but the plaintiff responded that she was fed up and was simply leaving. The employers offered to pay her wages for June, minus an advance they had already given her, but she answered that they would have to pay her thousands of pesos.<sup>19</sup>

Obedying orders was a key part of the requirement that workers show deference, which is an intrinsic part of the emotional work carried out by domestic employees, as various researchers have observed (Romero, 2002; Gorban and Tizziani, 2014). The deference that maintained hierarchies within the domestic sphere demanded that employers not only had control over the work itself, but also over the *way* in which that work was carried out (Rollins, 1985; Romero, 2002). This goes a long way towards explaining the level of detail in the orders described in the above extract, and the employers’ reaction to non-compliance with these.

There was considerable continuity between these “reprehensible” practices and others described in early periods. Between 1930 and 1937, for example, the *Sociedad de Beneficencia de la Capital* [Charitable Society of Buenos Aires] kept detailed records of girls who had been handed over to families of good economic standing to work as servants and it followed up on their subsequent situations. The girls and young women were often returned to the organization. The reasons for this varied, but the most common entailed descriptions of them as being “idle,” “insolent,” “useless,” and “careless.” It was said that they behaved badly, had no desire to work, that they didn’t like cooking, that they were unreliable, bad-tempered, that they stole, went out, and lived dissolute lives.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>19</sup>Record 215/1966.

<sup>20</sup>Sociedad de Beneficencia de la Capital. *General record of minors trusted into domestic service with families*. Background and subsequent whereabouts. No. 1, 1930–1937. The practice of placing orphaned boys and girls in domestic service predated this period and continued after it (at least into the 1950s), but there are no similar records for other periods. For more on this practice, see Allemandi (2015).

<sup>18</sup>Record 7/1960.



However, the enactment of labor legislation for this sector had changed the outlook considerably, resignifying some employer complaints. Demand that employers comply with the rights established by Decree-Law 326—such as respecting the boundaries of the tasks that a household worker could be asked to perform, which excluded cleaning premises in which the employer carried out his or her professional activities—could be interpreted as a lack of respect or as evidence of idleness.

In a case begun in 1958, for example, the conflict revolved around the definition of the duties the worker was obliged to carry out. The employer argued that he had suspended her for “refusing to carry out [...] domestic duties such as mopping a hallway.”<sup>21</sup> The employer had a workshop and had asked the worker to clean the sidewalk outside this establishment. The worker refused as she believed that this particular job was not part of her duties. As the lawyer from the union of household workers pointed out at the conciliation hearing, the law was on her side. According to the recently enacted Decree-Law 326, domestic service was work that was performed exclusively within the employer’s home and was defined as an activity from which the employer derived no financial benefit. In this case, as it concerned the employer’s workshop, the worker could either refuse to carry out the tasks in question or ask to be considered to be a company employee, which would entitle her to greater rights than she enjoyed as a household worker. As can be seen in the following extract, the worker refusing to carry out a task which she had been carrying out for years was seen as an affront to the employer’s authority and thus required disciplinary measures.

...she had carried out her duties for ten years without ever refusing to do so [...] and then she suddenly said that the task in question was not her responsibility. As it is domestic work, she cannot refuse to do it simply because she wants to decide all by herself what constitutes domestic work and what a company employee does. Nor can the employer be denied

the right to apply a disciplinary measure when someone refuses to do their job, as this would lead to him never being able to take action whenever the plaintiff refuses to fulfill her duties, leaving him standing there with his arms folded to wait for her to get over whatever the cause of her rebelliousness was.<sup>22</sup>

What had changed? The enactment of the domestic service decree. Up to that point, those employed in domestic service had been excluded from many of the labor rights that other workers enjoyed, as they were considered part of the “private” sphere. Although the rights that household workers were granted through Decree-Law 326 were fewer than those enjoyed by other workers at the time, its enactment in 1956 marked a point of inflection regarding how the state intervened in this activity and was interpreted by some during the period as limiting employer rights. Despite the restrictions of Decree-Law 326, the recognition of labor rights for the sector had created a situation in which respecting what was laid down in the law could be interpreted as an affront to the submissive attitude expected of domestic service staff.

Indeed, in many cases, reports of employers not complying with their duties and the very act of filing a complaint before the TDW was portrayed as an insult to the respectability of the defendants and as an action that itself called their honesty into question. This was the case in a complaint filed in 1961, which revolved around six months of unpaid wages. The employer argued that he had paid the wages in question but did not have receipts because this was standard practice for domestic service. He also argued that “my honor and that of my home and my family, and my own moral material responsibility [...] on which there is unanimous consensus among those in my social and professional circles, make the plaintiff’s claims unacceptable,” and he described her suit as “yet another gamble of the sort that, sadly, are so often attempted in the labor courts.”<sup>23</sup> Regardless of the amount of money

<sup>21</sup> Record 361/58.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> Record 119/1961.

at stake, the worker's suit called the defendant's honor into question, which was also the only proof he offered of having paid the wages in question.

However, filing a complaint was occasionally also a strategy on the part of the employer. The extract quoted below is from a case filed by someone who claimed to be an employer and who had not been able to get a domestic worker she had dismissed to remove her belongings from the room that she occupied in the house. Although the employer argued that her former employee had threatened to take her to court ("she has a lawyer and knows what to do"), it was the employer, in fact, who had started proceedings.

[...] I told my maid [...] that I no longer required her services [...]. She [...] told me angrily that she would not leave the house unless I paid her the sum of 20,000 pesos and gave her two months' notice so that she could "get comfortable somewhere else," as she didn't want to keep working in service. Even though this answer was surprising, I let her know that I was willing to give her a reasonable amount, but not as much as she was asking. I also offered her work in one of my brother's houses, [...] as he was willing to employ her. When I brought the matter up with her again the following day, she answered extremely rudely, loud enough for all the neighbors to hear, threatening me physically and saying that she had a lawyer and "knew what to do."<sup>24</sup>

In this case, the woman who the defendant claimed was her former employee said that she was a tenant, and used this as an argument not to leave the house. If in the above extract the employer pointed to the "surprising" answer of her (supposedly) former employee—who sought to "get comfortable" and "didn't want to keep working in service"—the fact that the person in question claimed to be a tenant was even more unsettling. The lack of deference—that is, acting out a position of inferiority vis-

à-vis employers—observed in the cases mentioned above is exacerbated in this one. Her refusal of a job offer and attempt to pass herself off as a tenant put the worker on equal footing with her supposed employer, which was inadmissible in the latter's eyes.

On the sixteenth of the month I was summoned by the police captain of the twenty-seventh precinct, where I went, only to discover to my surprise that my former servant's husband [...] was there and was the cause of my summons, and was making a statement in which he argued that he was my 'tenant since 1952 and that I refused to receive the 200 pesos in rent that he had been paying me regularly since then, that he had no receipts because he had always trusted me' and that the furniture in the room he occupied in my house belonged to him. (I should add that the room is the service room that his wife lives in, where he is permitted to spend the night and which contains furnishings typical of this type of room, which I provided and which belong to me.)<sup>25</sup>

Regardless of the TDW's ruling, which considered the plaintiff to be worker rather than a tenant and ordered the defendant to pay 4,836 pesos in wages owed, it is interesting to see this strategy being used in other cases from the time, although this was not true in other periods. In these cases, whether the person in question was an employee or a lodger or tenant came to depend on her possessions and the way she used the employers' or owners' house. For example, in the case cited above, witnesses were asked to declare regarding the conditions of the rooms that the alleged employee lived in ("so that they might truthfully swear that they know the room to be very small and that a narrow bed only just fits in it").<sup>26</sup> Similarly, in a case filed in 1957, to prove that she was actually a tenant, the supposed worker presented a receipt for rent money and others to prove that she owned a washing machine, a gas cooker, and a heater, in addition to proof of paying the electricity

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> Record 156/1958.

<sup>24</sup> Record 156/1958.

bill, and another receipt that showed that not only was she not a domestic employee, but that she herself employed such a person. The employee/tenant also argued that

...I could never have been a servant when I occupy most of the house, together with my husband and grown-up son and daughter, as I have exclusive use of two rooms on the first floor and one on the second as well as the terrace, while the plaintiff only occupies one room that he uses as his office and another as his bedroom; [...] in the ten years I have been a tenant here I have acted as such before everyone I know, throwing parties and employing service staff.<sup>27</sup>

The fact that the same person could be presented as either a domestic worker or a tenant/lodger is significant in itself because it reveals a newfound closeness between the material culture of employers and workers that would have been unthinkable in earlier times. Furthermore, as emerged in the cases cited above, the position the person in question occupied—and their social status—was based on how they used the domestic space and the type of goods they consumed. These cases reveal that the tensions sparked by the granting of labor rights to this sector were inscribed in a broader context in which social hierarchies had been called into question. I will delve deeper into this issue in the next section.

### **Immoral Workers**

In addition to insults, Decree-Law 326 listed “immoral or licentious conduct, lack of personal hygiene, and grave or repeated transgressions of hiring conditions” as causes for dismissal.<sup>28</sup> In this way, the letter of the law gave rise to the mention of personal considerations about workers<sup>29</sup>, such as descriptions of their “inappropriate” uses of the employers’ home, factors, which would play a key role in the justifications that the employers gave before the TDW for having terminated the labor relationship. These

statements frequently contained descriptions of workers as women with dubious sexual morals whose habits put the respectability of the employers’ home at risk.

In this sense, a case filed in 1964 is of particular interest, in which the employer justified dismissing her employee on the grounds of her immoral conduct. Although the employer’s lawyer argued that “with regard to her work itself, [his] client put up with serious shortcomings,” what led to her dismissal was the fact that “with regard to personal matters [...] the servant’s conduct was utterly unacceptable.”<sup>30</sup> The worker had had an adulterous affair with the manager of the building where the employer’s apartment was. The latter had intervened by “giving her servant advice, trying to make her recapitulate and putting her on the right path.”<sup>31</sup> However, the worker “reacted badly to her wise words, which contained great moral lessons to persuade her to avoid situations at odds with God’s teachings and commandments and our laws” and “instead of thanking her for these wholesome reflections, the servant chose to insult her employer and her family in front of other people.”<sup>32</sup> The employee’s sexual morality was of relevance in as far as it affected the image of the employer and her family, who was prompted by this to warn her employee of the “scandal, which everyone in the building now knew about.”<sup>33</sup> Similarly, the insults she had received in front of other people were a deciding factor in terminating the labor relationship. The worker’s “lack of decency” was taken into account as it affected the respectability of her employers’ home.

Immorality, measured in terms of the refusal to adapt to the parameters of female respectability, could even call into question the very fact of the defendant being an employee. This was true of a case filed in 1959, in which the defendant, to prove that the plaintiff had not worked in his house, argued that she lived a dissolute life that was incompatible with being a woman of honor: she got up late, at ten in the morning, “every day later than the last,”

<sup>27</sup> Record 85/1957.

<sup>28</sup> Article 6, Decree-Law 326/56.

<sup>29</sup> For a more detailed version of this argument, see (Pérez y Canevaro, 2015).

<sup>30</sup> Record 48/1964.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

she went out and “did whatever she wanted to,” and was not in the employer’s home all day long. She was also ungrateful, vindictive, and rude. If she had resided in the defendant’s house it was, he alleged, because she had been his guest, who he had given shelter to out of “need,” and when she was finally evicted from the room that he had lent her, she had insulted and threatened the owners of the home, saying that she would do everything in her power to cause them trouble. Although these arguments regarding the plaintiff were of no consequence in the TDW’s ruling (or in that of the Labor Court that later ruled on the appeal), it is significant that the defendant presented them as the only proof that the plaintiff had not worked for him.<sup>34</sup>

In another case filed in 1956, the employers claimed that although the worker was “competent, she was a compulsive drinker, so much so that this was a grave risk to her health and to the safety of those who lived with her.”<sup>35</sup> The worker was also described as being an “unscrupulous” person who had deliberately come up with a plot to unjustly accuse her employers of owing her eight months’ wages. The employers, who had no receipts to prove that they had paid the wages in question, made reference to the “undergarments, dresses, coat, and jewelry” that the employee had purchased while she worked for them, as well as the “sum of money” that she had sent to relatives of hers in another province as evidence of payment: the money necessary for her to make such expenditures could only have come from her wages.<sup>36</sup> The TDW ruled in favor of the employer. This case illustrates that referring to what workers purchased or consumed not only functioned as indirect proof of payment of wages but was also an expression of employers’ anxiety in this regard.

Different researchers have observed that the increase in the purchasing power of the working class and the emergence of the working-class consumer during Perón’s time in office was a new source of discomfort among the middle class, which was partly channeled into a stereotype that identified

workers as ostentatious consumers of needless goods (Elena, 2011; Milaneseo, 2014). Natalia Milaneseo has observed how middle-class criticism in this regard had a gender bias to it. The behavior that drew most criticism was that of working-class women, who were identified as migrants from other parts of Argentina who had gained access to certain goods for the first time and spent all their money on clothes, cosmetics, and jewelry (Milaneseo, 2014, p.148).

Years later, what female workers bought and their nature as consumers continued to be of concern to the middle class. Indeed, they were issues that often arose in employers’ responses to the complaints their former employees filed before the TDW. What is particularly significant is that when referring to these consumer habits, the employers focused on the same goods that years earlier were the object of criticism of the middle class: clothing, cosmetics, and jewelry. As in the case cited above, employers often described workers’ purchases as proof that they had paid their wages. In doing so they sought to demonstrate that the workers had had enough money to spend it on “needless” items, proving that not only had they paid their wages but that these had been relatively high while also insinuating that employees handled their money irresponsibly.

In a case filed in 1966, for example, a worker claimed that she was owed wages for her entire period of employment, which had lasted three years and five months. She maintained that her former employer had not paid her, nor had she given her time off or allowed her to go out on her day off, arguing that “as she was a country girl she would be taken advantage of” and “who knows what might happen [to her]”. The worker’s complaint shows that her qualities as a consumer played a central part in defining her working conditions. According to her file, if the employer had not paid her wages it was—in her point of view—to protect her from herself. The employer thus recreated the stereotype that pointed to internal migrants as compulsive consumers of junk and trinkets, which easily fell prey to unscrupulous salesmen (Milaneseo, 2014), thus taking on a

<sup>34</sup> Record 337/1959.

<sup>35</sup>Record 42/1956.

<sup>36</sup>*Ibid.*

paternalistic (or, rather, materialistic) attitude.<sup>37</sup>

In this sense, the worker's claims also called gender, class, and ethnic stereotypes into question. Intense social and geographic mobility characterized Argentine society between the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth. The massive migratory flows from Europe that largely settled in the coastal region were followed, from the 1930s onwards, by an intensification in internal migration from the north of Argentina to Buenos Aires and other urban centers. The middle-class identity that crystallized in the mid-twentieth century was constructed on the basis of an opposition to the working class that was structured on ethnic stereotypes. Within that opposition, the middle class identified itself as having descended from European immigrants, while it defined the working class as *cabecitas negras* (a discriminatory term that roughly translates as "little black faces") who had descended from migrants from other parts of the country (Garguin, 2012).

In response to the suit, the employer claimed that while she had worked for her, the "servant" had spent her money on "clothes, shoes, going to the hairdresser, and other things she liked to treat herself to," which proved that each month she was paid her salary, which "she did what she liked with, as I wasn't her guardian and nor was she [the employee] some idiot someone could take advantage of."<sup>38</sup> In the employer's discourse, the fact that the worker had been able to buy shoes and clothing or go to the hair salon not only sought to prove that she had paid her wages but that these had been enough to pay for such "treats."<sup>39</sup> Furthermore, the fact that her discourse focused on these goods returns to the stereotype mentioned above, in that it

highlights—albeit more subtly—the frivolity of the products the worker had purchased.

Such goods were also the focus of reports of theft. In the eyes of their employers, the fact that employees had such goods in their possession was explained by their being involved in criminal acts or at the very least immoral ones. In this sense, Milanese (2014, p.145) has observed that the increase in female workers' levels of consumption was often explained not just by rising salaries but also as the fruit of certain strategies on the part of employees when handling the household budget, wherein they frequented certain shops in return for a commission from the owner, thus increasing their monthly earnings. Regardless of whether or not such accusations were true, they reveal the apprehension of the middle class, who felt somehow threatened by the improved living standards of domestic workers. If the presence of a domestic employee had guaranteed the social status of employers up to that point, their new purchasing power could call that status into question.

It is interesting that clothing and jewelry (along with small sums of money) were also among the items most frequently reported as having been stolen, both within the criminal justice system (Acha, 2013) and in cases filed before the TDW. As different researchers have pointed out, "suspicion of theft seems to be an integral part of the relationships established in domestic service," as a way of constructing the inferiority of workers in relation to their employers (Gorban and Tizziani, 2014, p.60; Brites, 2007). In the context of Peronism, the image of a domestic employee who was wearing the same clothes as her employer had become "the most common example of the growing sense of social equality" in which clothing expressed a gradual homogenization of consumption that "made it hard to unequivocally express differences in social class and establish clear divisions between the different social sectors" (Milanese, 2014, p.143). Several years later, the fact that reports of theft centered on these items could be seen as a way of disputing the legitimacy of domestic workers' access to objects that had erstwhile been central to defining social status, thus reaffirming both their social and moral inferiority.

<sup>37</sup> As has been pointed out by Rebekah Pite (2011), in Argentina domestic service was usually handled by female employers, creating what can be described as a maternalistic relationship (Rollins, 1985). Nevertheless, this is not always visible in the demands made before the TDW, which were sometimes addressed to male employers and sometimes to their wives.

<sup>38</sup>Record 337/1966.

<sup>39</sup>*Ibid.*

This is clearly illustrated by a case filed in 1964, in which the worker was accused of theft in response to her claim regarding wages owed and severance pay. According to the employers, the worker said that “the things she was wearing [...] had been gifts from her boyfriend,” when she had actually acquired them with small sums of money she had stolen from her employers’ wallet and pocketbook.<sup>40</sup> They also accused her of having stolen a gold chain and urged her to return it if she didn’t want to end up in prison. The worker was also accused of having mistreated her former employer, a “semi-disabled old lady,” who she was said to have “threatened with a knife.”<sup>41</sup> Finally, the employers alleged that the worker did not return to their house on Sundays after her day off, as she told her parents, thus calling her sexual morality into question.

However, the employers focused their recriminations on the fact that this behavior was “the thanks we received for the good treatment and generosity” they had shown the worker, who since working for them had “put on 9 kilograms, and had been dressed [by them] from head to toes, and [had] received help for her parents and siblings as far as was possible.”<sup>42</sup> Instead of the deference they expected in response to this “help,” the worker had repeatedly “treated [the employers] with disrespect,” and added injury to insult by filing a complaint before the TDW. In this sense, at the core of the employers’ complaints is the idea that through her actions, their employee was endangering domestic hierarchies. In contrast, by describing these misdemeanors and recollecting gestures that, from their point of view, their employee should have been grateful for, they sought to restore these hierarchies.

### Conclusion

Different studies have pointed to deference as playing a key role in the work of domestic employees (with regard to Argentina, see Gorbán and Tizziani, 2014). Specifically, Mary Romero (2002) has underlined it as being a key factor in the emotional work that

is carried out in the context of domestic service, as it allows employers to place themselves in a position of social superiority. To achieve this, regardless of their actual beliefs, domestic workers have to play a submissive role (Rollins, 1985). In this way, in the “private” sphere, employers assert the status they would like to have in the “public” sphere. However, if deference guarantees this status, then its absence generates considerable tension among those who are expecting it.

In the mid-twentieth century, domestic service took on a key role in terms of the construction of distance between the social classes, particularly in terms of the configuration of a middle-class identity. The destabilization of social hierarchies that was a consequence of improvements in the living standards of the working classes was articulated with the middle class’s quest for new strategies through which to set themselves apart. However, although having a domestic employee was a status symbol, their presence was also a permanent reminder of the new social standing the working class had achieved in Argentina. This is particularly relevant in a context in which the number of middle-class homes employing domestic service had grown while the number of domestic workers per home had shrunk.

The changes that took place in a social relationship that had been central to producing and reproducing inequalities of class, gender, and ethnicity brought about unease and concern among employers. On the one hand, the legal recognition of labor rights for services staff and the creation of a legal entity before which workers could initiate proceedings so that these rights were respected dealt a fierce blow to existing domestic hierarchies. On the other hand, workers’ growing purchasing power unleashed the demon of a growing sense of equality, which was crystallized in the image of the domestic employee who wore the same clothes as her employer, making it impossible to distinguish one from the other at first glance. Finally, the spread of live-out working arrangements, coupled with the growing participation of middle-class women in the labor market, gave rise to a situation that had hitherto been unheard of: workers who were largely strangers being present in the employers’

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> Record 52/1964.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

home without being supervised by the lady of the house. The construction of the stereotype of the worker who thoughtlessly consumes needless goods converged with a questioning of workers' morality, in an attempt to conjure up the danger of bringing the material culture and consumer expectations of workers and employers together, so as to reconstruct the hierarchies at stake in these operations.

The behavior of household workers that their employers described to the TDW as being "improper" shows how the relationships that were established in the context of domestic service are a key area in which to observe the construction of social distance and middle-class identity in contemporary Argentina. In this sense, in addition to shedding light on an occupation that has been overlooked in Argentine historiography, this article aims to show the importance of relationships established in the "private" sphere when understanding dynamics that have received more attention from social scientists because they are considered part of "public" life.

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