



PAPEL CRÍTICO 90

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Argentina y sus clases medias: panoramas de la investigación empírica en ciencias sociales

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Páginas: 266

Editorial: Biblios, 2021

Ciudad: Ciudad Autónoma de Buenos Aires (Argentina)

It is the concern for the present and the leading role given to “the middle class” by the media what drives the coordinators of *Argentina y sus clases medias* to dispute the concept and to operate politically, far from manifestos and close to archives, interviews, and ethnographic fieldwork. Sergio Visacovsky and Enrique Garguin, leaders in middle class studies in Argentina, offer a series of investigations that, united by the awareness of the problems of the field, have undertaken the challenging task of approaching the middle classes from the social sciences.

While dismantling the scaffolding that sustains the prevailing common sense on the subject, the coordinators seek to consolidate a new field of studies within the scholarly tradition dedicated to thinking about middle classes in Argentina. This is made clear in the introduction to this new volume, which forms part of a series of publications promoted by the “Programa de Estudios sobre Clases Medias”, set up in 2004 under the direction of Sergio Visacovsky. Aware of the place that the book occupies in the state of the art, the opening words offer a rich panorama of the studies that have been devoted to thinking about the middle classes.

The authors point out the limits of objectivist approaches and, at the same time, highlight the empirical efforts of the founder of Argentine scientific sociology, Gino Germani, of the early social anthropology that transcended the metropolitan focus, and of the new perspectives

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based on the socio-cultural character of the category. In this sense, they highlight the works of authors who contributed to the theoretical and methodological renewal of the study of middle classes, such as Pierre Bourdieu, Edward Thompson, Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, and Erik Olin Wright. For the study of Latin America, they underline the importance of David Parker's enquiries and indicate, for the Argentine case, Ezequiel Adamovsky's research as the one that marked the beginning of a new perspective that understands "middle class" as an identity. This heterogeneous socio-cultural line is the thread that binds together the nine chapters that accompany the introduction. In all of them, "the middle class ceases to be a known population and becomes something to be questioned: a social category to be understood through its diverse uses and its constitutive effects on social reality" (p. 11).

Contrary to what one might think, the authors do not delve into the sources in search of the middle class, they hardly hear its explicit mention in ethnographic fieldwork, but rather seem to stumble, during their longer research, upon problems that require the questioning of the processes of formation of what is known as the "middle class." Not content to take its existence as a segment of the population for granted, and without dodging this thorn in the side of social class theories, they assume the task of thinking it through honestly. Researchers with diverse geographical and disciplinary backgrounds (anthropology, history, sociology) cover different Argentine regions and, together, give the book a singular diachrony that spans moments as distant as the first Peronism and the government of Mauricio Macri. The studies seem to be grouped around three axiological horizons, particularly important for research on middle classes, in which class emerges intertwined with diverse universes of values.

The first horizon is linked to a series of values that played a leading role in the emergence of a middle-class identity that arose in the context of early Peronism as a response to the social ascent of the working-class sectors. Narratives and forms of distinction were then articulated around education, whiteness, sacrifice; values that were confused with those of the nation. Inés Pérez and Rosa Aboy project these enquiries onto the material and spatial plane and enrich the understanding of the period 1946-1970, illuminating the role of the material culture of the home in the demarcation of social distances and the function of housing in the production of differentiated middle-class identities.

Another horizon brings together the notions popularised under the clamour of the "cacerolazos", a form of popular protest that at the beginning of the millennium brought together a set of demands under the slogan of anti-corruption (p. 153). After the failure of the "middle class" Argentina, new narratives emerge associated with certain sectors of the Argentine middle classes that redefine their identity through a game of associations and oppositions related to the crisis and the corruption. Gabriel Noel, Sarah Muir and Fernando Toyos investigate these languages, performativities and political-ideological positionings that are typical of the post-crisis period, but which resonate throughout the last two decades.

A third horizon is shaped by a new set of values that has begun to manifest itself more forcefully in recent years as a result of the multiplication of discourses that form part of contemporary capitalism. Without discarding the logics of effort and sacrifice; enjoyment and comfort are incorporated in the analyses of Sara Kauko, Julia Hang, Sonia Prelat, Patricia Vargas and Nicolás Viotti, who investigate processes in which middle-class identity is superimposed or transformed in dialogue with others (athletic, occupational, spiritual), characteristic of socio-cultural transformations that are underway.

Let us see how this thematic warp, whose threads are projected from various moments in the past to the present, is completed by a powerful weft.

In chapter 1, "Clase media, género y domesticidad: el hogar como espacio de negociación de las distancias sociales" ("Middle class, gender and domesticity: the home as a space for negotiating social distances"), Pérez explores the morality of consumption through an analysis of documentary sources, considering the contributions of historical studies dedicated to identity processes. Focusing on Mar del Plata, a city of mass tourism in the scenario opened by early Peronism, the historian reveals that the material culture of modern households, its meanings, and the relationships it enabled are key to understanding the processes of class identification, in a context in which subjects from diverse social sectors gained access to the model of domesticity associated with the middle class.

In chapter 2, "De inquilinos a propietarios: la construcción del mercado de la propiedad horizontal en Buenos Aires, 1947-1970" ("From tenants to owners: the construction of the horizontal property market in Buenos Aires, 1947-1970"), Aboy states that, between the passing of the Horizontal Property Law and the popularisation of minimum housing, a large part of the population of the city of Buenos Aires was able to gain access to the ownership of flats. With this, she observes the configuration of a real estate market aimed at creating and satisfying the desires and needs of the middle sectors of Buenos Aires. Borrowing contributions from cultural history and urban geography, the author argues that the flats functioned as catalysts for new and differentiated social identities of the middle classes participating in the market.

In chapter 3, "La clase media como lenguaje y los lenguajes de las clases medias en tres ciudades del interior bonaerense" ("The middle class as language and the languages of the middle classes in three cities of Buenos Aires Province"), Noel reviews three ethnographic field experiences which he presents in the form of anthropological vignettes. Focusing on the analysis of language, the author reveals the logics of identification of the inhabitants of three cities at different times: Tandil in 2003, Villa Gesell in 2008 and Verónica in 2014. The evocation of the middle class drives diverse rhetorics throughout these three temporospatial points. The uses that the inhabitants of the three areas give to the concept says a lot about the ways in which they position themselves spatially, morally, and politically in their local contexts, where Noel finds configurations and notorious asynchronies with respect to the metropolitan case that is usually, and erroneously, projected to the rest of the country.

In chapter 4, "Un campo inesperado de inclusión social: negociaciones identitarias y movilidad socioeconómica en un equipo de triatlón en Santiago del Estero" ("An unexpected field of social inclusion: identity negotiations and socio-economic mobility in a triathlon team in Santiago del Estero"), Kauko observes in her ethnographic research that the practice of a "sport-lifestyle" such as triathlon can function as a seedbed of social inclusion. In Ironsport gymnasium, amateur athletes identified with the "white" middle class of the city coexist with "criollo" scholarship holders from the suburbs, to whom the opportunity to participate in the team is presented as a possibility of social ascent. Kauko's approach consists of incorporating into her analysis the idea that identification with a lifestyle can eclipse class as a determinant of subjectivity.

In chapter 5, "Universitario y de barrio: la construcción de un nosotros de clase media en un club social y deportivo platense" ("University and neighbourhood: the construction

of a middle-class 'us' in a social and sports club in La Plata"), Hang collects findings from her ethnographic fieldwork at Club Universitario de La Plata (2013-2018) which allows the sociologist to follow the trajectory of the moral values that were mobilised by members from the origins of the club to the present of the research. At this time of institutional crisis, Hang finds that the club appeals to moral values typical of its historical identity that exalt neighbourhood, humility, and effort, while incorporating others, typical of new forms of subjectivity that occur within the framework of contemporary capitalism. A middle-class "us" is found by the author in a series of practices that allow the actors in the institution to distance themselves from other clubs and identify with their own.

In chapter 6, "La corrupción como categoría clave para pensar la clase media argentina" ("Corruption as a key category for thinking about the Argentine middle class"), Muir recovers the notion of corruption as an ethnographic category that circulates within the social world of the middle class. For the author, the autobiographical story of a former civil servant can be understood as a discursive act in which features of the 2003-2007 period can be observed. This moment is key to explaining the political hyperpolarisation of the last decade, which for Muir is product of recent processes related to the reconfiguration of the middle class after the end of the crisis at the beginning of the 21st century. In this framework, the appeal to corruption functions as a language that serves both to denounce the neoliberal policies of the 1990s, or to explain the impossibility of developing a successful project for the country. Argentina's middle class, understood as a spatial and socio-moral configuration, is characterised for the author by a paradoxical dynamic, between opposition to corruption and recognition of the impossibility of resisting it completely.

In chapter 7, "El pasaje por la crisis: diferencias generacionales, valor y trabajo en la Argentina" ("Passing through the crisis: generational differences, value and work in Argentina"), Prelat analyses a series of narratives in which different generations of entrepreneurs in the city of Concordia, Entre Ríos Province, make sense of their labour strategies in the context of recurrent crises affecting the country. Drawing on forty-eight in-depth interviews and on collective memory studies, the author finds that the older entrepreneurs, who had opened their businesses before or during the 2001-2002 crisis, resorted to a series of narratives describing active postures in the face of the crisis, while the younger ones, who started their activities in the period 2005-2008, deployed attitudes of denial that appealed to values related to self-help discourse, dehistoricising their own experience. With her analysis of the interviews, the researcher not only draws attention to new forms of subjectivity, but also illuminates the role of collective memory in generational intersubjectivity and in occupational identities.

In chapter 8, "¿Orientaciones políticas de la 'clase media', o la 'clase media' y sus orientaciones políticas?" ("Political orientations of the 'middle class', or the 'middle class' and its political orientations?"), Toyos explores the intersections between middle-class self-perception and ideological-political orientations. Between 2017 and 2018 the author set up four focus groups composed of residents of the Autonomous City of Buenos Aires, whose members self-perceive themselves as "middle class", and whom he divided according to their various political-ideological orientations. The researcher postulates that political-ideological orientation influences the ways in which corruption is represented and observes how the members of the pro-Macrism group construct representations of corruption that have similarities with the moral prescriptions examined by studies on Argentine middle-class identity.

In chapter 9, “Entre el esfuerzo y el confort: autonomía y cambio cultural” (“Between effort and comfort: autonomy and cultural change”), Vargas and Viotti propose that it is necessary to pay attention to a new universe of values centred on comfort, and which develop as what they call an “alternative lifestyle” becomes popular. This lifestyle functions, for the authors, as a space to produce subjectivity in which enjoyment cut across work, human relations, and everyday experience. The life story of Anabela, a businesswoman with an alternative lifestyle, is one of the many cases that researchers use to rethink the middle class based on contemporary practical situations and to understand the socio-cultural ongoing transformations.

The studies discussed deploy a variety of empirical, methodological, and conceptual tools that make the book a true panorama of social science research. In times of hyper-specificity in scientific research, it seems important to delimit groups of studies that allow us to follow the trajectory of themes, concepts, and lines of research from interdisciplinary approaches. In the case of the middle class, the generosity between disciplines that share a concern for everyday life, as well as the incorporation of a federal criterion covering different areas of Argentina, promises to be a good approach to continue adopting in future compilations.

The heterogeneity of the chapters reviewed should not overshadow the complementarity they represent. They share, along with the introductory analysis, the characteristic of being written by unprejudiced authors, who do not seek to test preconceived notions of class, but to understand the ways in which people think and act while elaborating, consciously or unconsciously, self-perceptions of class. Along the way, researchers manage to flesh out a category that emerges from the analysis of the very stuff of human reality. The empirical datum, as Thompson put it, “does not stand compliantly like a table for interrogation: it stirs, in the medium of time, before our eyes” (Thompson, 1978: 7), but capturing this dynamism requires alert and flexible scientists who do not seek their truth, but new truths, always complex, elusive, and provisional, that allow us to continue thinking from new perspectives.

REFERENCES

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