

PORTEÑO LOGICS

The Meaning of Taste and Morality in Social Classification
in Buenos Aires



Hovedfagsoppgave i Sosialantropologi
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INTRODUCTION

Cultural flows and local systems of meaning in the metropolis

Cultural reception

The social and cultural processes characterising the modern metropolis already constitute a considerable bulk of literature in sociology and increasingly anthropology (see Low, 1999; Inda and Rosaldo, 2002). A recurring feature or underlying set of ideas present across these contributions is the concern with transnational processes and cultural flows; spreading of trends, goods, people, ideas and capital conducive to the alternation, modification, negotiation or even revolution of forms and relations constitutive of the everyday social experience of individuals and groups (Appadurai, 1990). Appadurai conceptualises global cultural flows into different, both autonomous and intersecting, deterritorialised scapes; of ideas, technology, media, capital and people (Appadurai, 1990). These are useful models for grasping the diversification of global forces and influences, although it doesn't fully address the issue of cultural reception. Cultural reception underlines much of anthropology's concern with the concept of globalisation, particularly as a response to earlier discourses of cultural imperialism, which equated globalisation more or less with westernisation (Hannerz, 1996, 2002). Three salient arguments are fronted against traditional discourse of cultural imperialism in connection to theories of globalisation (see Inda and Rosaldo, 2002). One of them, and of particular interest to this work, addresses the aspect of local social structures having a bearing on the appropriation of and meaning attributed to forms, goods and practices mediated by these cultural flows that transcend physical borders. (1) In questioning simplistic and naïve models of cultural reception, it is suggested that

“the process of reading cultural texts is actually a rather complicated affair, one that entails the active participation of the viewing subject in the construction of meaning (see Morley, 1992). Third World consumers faced with an imported text, media or otherwise, will not simply or necessarily absorb its ideologies, values, and life-styles positions. Rather, they will bring their own cultural dispositions to bear on such a text, interpreting it according to their own cultural codes (see Ang 1985; Liebes and Katz, 1990). What takes place in the viewing encounter is that foreign cultural forms have a tendency to become customized. They are interpreted, translated, and appropriated according to local conditions of reception.” (Inda and Rosaldo, 2002:16)

Regarding the emerging nomenclature of globalisation studies this text will refer to “trans-national cultural flows” (2), and I approach it analytically from the perspective of *the social meaning locally ascribed to the goods and practices introduced under these processes*. As implied, I will investigate how the argument of cultural reception as submitted above relates to the physical and social locus providing the framework for the study.

The practical struggle of meaning

Hegemony is traditionally associated with power, and power can be possessed in knowledge, more specifically the right to define and assert the meanings of phenomena; practices, people and ideas. The idea of hegemony is a useful theoretical tool in conceptualising the dynamics of assigning meaning to new or ambiguous phenomena. As articulated by Gramsci (1971), we can think of hegemony not as a doxic state of a culture (see Bourdieu, 1977), but as a dominant mode or form establishing itself and constantly striving for its legitimacy and right to define the world, its practices and expressions, against opposing or contesting modes and forms. Hegemonies of meaning are about power struggles, and their longevity are explained by and seen through the symbolic violence (3) as exerted by the reproduction and practice of its concomitant discourses.

Interpreting Bourdieu, we arrive at the established structure of hegemony considering the struggle between classifications, dominant and dominated modes of perception within a social space, at odds in attributing their meaning to phenomena, to oneself and to others (Bourdieu, 1977). I will draw specific attention to, and analyse carefully, what I call hegemonic *categories*; not universal faculties of thought enabling cognition, but concepts imbued with the agency of fixing social meaning on actors, relations, practices and styles. The meaning denoted by these categories are contingent upon context, however, they find their conditioning and the latitude of their use within a socially located discourse of distinction and hierarchy. As such, I choose to call these categories hegemonic as they are instrumental in the reproduction of discourses concomitant to a specific world view, discourses that in turn provide a continuous framework for classification of and attributing meaning to individuals, relations and lifestyles.

Hegemonic discourses inscribe new phenomena and old conventions with meaning; justifying, legitimising, alienating and ridiculing. In this study, attention will be paid to how categories denoting moralities and taste logically inform a language of class. This language, which constitutes a set of discourses, is conducive to knowledge about the social world; practical and subjective through the

performing of this “speak”. I do not recognise hegemonic discourses as internally static, allowing only for a homogenous social optic characteristic of a clearly delineated demographic with the propensity to identically share an experience emotionally and cognitively. However, social stratification objectified in material inequality structures differentiated classification, in that the forming of different lifestyles, social trajectories and values will dictate and define *the scope* of social experience shared by groups, small and larger ones, within a society (Bourdieu, 1984). It remains feasible at least that tradition, custom and norm generate a common view, experience and ultimately perception, leading to the foundations for a common sense articulated in practice.

Porteños and cosmopolitanism

These two concepts form in various ways a basis for the study. Porteños, a category which through popular discourse and literature long has stood to be associated with a metropolitan lifestyle, practices and not least attitudes, readily conforms to the notion of cosmopolitanism defined as *the outlook, orientation and values of a city dweller, open to and interested in outside influences, and by extension having the propensity to assimilate and manage the expressions and practices of extraneous sources.*⁽⁴⁾ Cosmopolitanism in this sense might be compared to the disposition for cultivating an affinity for agents of elsewhere (objects, trends, norms and ideas), connecting emotionally with objects and practices perceived to symbolise an other place of origin. As such, cosmopolitanism cannot be limited in definition to a love for the city, a kind of urbanism, but more so, it connotes an attitude and set of values that inspire an affinity with symbols and agents from a whole range of sites, and so it is lifted out of the simple dichotomy of the rural versus the urban. Seeing as the city dweller nevertheless cherishes the life of his urban setting, the sites of constructed nostalgia for which he longs, remain primarily other metropolis. It is in the interest of my study to investigate this cosmopolitan dimension to the porteño, and see how it relates to the argument of cultural reception and local social discourses. I will argue that this cosmopolitanism as defined above is a durable and recurring characteristic of Buenos Aires and its inhabitants, however, it changes its focus of affinity over eras, as well as it serves to fuel and inform inhabitants’ ways of viewing themselves and others. As such, porteño cosmopolitanism is constantly reinvented, redefined and contested as cultural and socially discrete sensibilities are subjected to the vicissitudes of displacing economical regimes of accumulation and political establishments.

Physical, social and thematic loci

The physical demarcation of a lifestyle

Apart from Buenos Aires, capital city of Argentina, I also draw on material collected from sites in the immediate surroundings of the city, the suburban area of the province bearing the same name. Only a few of the between 20 and 30 *barrios* (parts of the city, neighbourhoods) constitute the space where I have conducted research. This reflects the social movement of the informants, their organisation of daily life and the spatial patterns of pastimes and recreational activities, as I have invariably roamed the same areas as they usually do. The *barrios* most central in the thesis and referred to throughout the text are those of Belgrano, Palermo, Recoleta, Barrio Norte and El Centro. Some *barrios* are mainly residential, like Belgrano where I lived after having spent the first months in Recoleta. Some are explicitly associated with commerce and professional life, like the downtown area of El Centro, while some play host to the clusters of establishments (bars, discos, bistros, restaurants, nightclubs and lodging-by-the-hour hotels) associated with recreation, like the zone of Las Cañitas between Palermo and Belgrano. Moving across and in between these zones as determined by the boundaries of these *barrios*, is a general testament to one's position in the social structure. The lifestyle implied by for example working in the financial district of El Centro, living in Belgrano and going out in Las Cañitas are spatial indications suggesting the socioeconomic position, and consequently possibilities of the informants.

Profesionales

The informants forming the empirical basis for the study is a set of individuals and families, ranging in age from 19 to 80; the majority, however, are between 25 and 30, and early 50's. Most of them represent the segment of the middle classes enjoying the status of *profesionales* (professionals) plying their trade (accountants, lawyers, medical doctors, architects and engineers) recognised as such by a formalised and extensive higher education and an appurtenant association. Some are still immersed in their studies at colleges or universities. Among the middle aged demographic, men are generally professionally active, while women are mainly housewives (often with university education but no professional experience), *amas de casas* (literally meaning owner of the house). These patterns reflect the changing structures of the urban Argentinean society regarding generations and gendered labour. In the younger segment both men and women pursue professional lives, both out of necessity and

personal aspiration. Parts of this must be seen in relation to the currents of the economy, parts of it in relation to changing cultural gender politics.

As *profesionales*, informants do not among them reflect the deep-rooted and highly manifest economic inequality and stratification characterising the broader society. Throughout the greater part of the 20th century, it is claimed both in sociological literature and popular discourse that Argentina is unique in Latin America for having a middle class population as its dominant social segment (Svampa, 2001). The distinctly recognisable and dense urban poverty characteristic of metropolis throughout the continent has so far not been a striking feature of Buenos Aires. This picture is changing though. There is a mass fall from grace experienced by millions of porteños as unemployment figures continuously reach new heights. However, regardless of more or less transitory personal economic woes, my informants regard themselves as belonging to the same social strata, along with the millions of other Argentineans who seemingly by default claim status as “middle class” citizens. I will show that a context of crisis is purposeful in exploring how means other than economic are accentuated and emphasised in claiming class status.

In the violent climate of economic recession, political instability and social insecurity, local discourse of class invokes a wide range of social subcategories. As such, the concept of class is very much present in informants’ reference to self and others. Clear markers by which they generally conceptualise differences and similarities across the broader society are educational background, cultural level and perceived acquisitive power. *It is the purpose of this study to analyse how informants attribute meaning to the actions, practices and preferences of others. As stated above, this logic, or system of classification as represented in dominant, or hegemonic social discourses, will be thrown into relief against cultural and economic changes present in Buenos Aires.*

Practical meaning and meaningful practice

The main argument of the text, is that local social discourses utilising categories imbued with notions of taste and morality not only provide a classificatory logic for a familiar array of people of practices, but that they also actively bring to bear on a socially differentiated cultural reception, contextually redefining and reinventing notions of the porteño and cosmopolitanism. Social classification refers to the process of conceptually situating individuals and groups in a social structure, as classes, but this is done by inscribing social meaning in actions, situations and objects, i.e., infusing fragments with a meaning as they stand to symbolise *practices and preferences associated* with (imagined) social

groups.

I am situating myself within the daily lives of *profesionales* and I am analysing these constructs from the perspective found in this social segment. I seek to explore the dynamics and dialectics between this discrete social discourse, practices and the stylisation of life. The dynamics and fluidity of a metropolis (under siege or liberation by neoliberalism) characterised by changing conventions, trends and social practices, is a locus that, to my experience, particularly well elucidate the processes of classification as articulated and performed in the meeting between hegemonic meanings set in structures of social hierarchy and the debouchments of new styles and social practices.

Methodological and theoretical points of entry

Objective condition and subjective experience

I make the assumption that practical knowledge is subjective and that the world is experienced ultimately by how it is perceived. As such, I am taking a subjectivist approach in representing informants' meaningful constructs of phenomena. This however does not mean that I conflate popular discourse or folk models with objective conditions of social reality. Interpreting phenomena as perceived by informants is a main concern, as well as outlining the observable conditions wherein this practical knowledge is produced, and indeed deployed. As informants' accounts and views can never represent a scientific representation (Bourdieu, 1977), what is indisputably referable as real, will only yield a meaningful dimension when set as the framework for the diversity of subjective experiences it is capable of producing.

This leads to a consideration of how perception is formed, or to the principles of classification - discerning, recognising and differentiating. The habitus, as articulated by Bourdieu (1977), is the incorporated structure that generates a socially positioned perception and principles for action, the internalisation of the material structures that make the objective conditions for existence, determined by the composite capital agents possess and how this relates to their position-taking in the social space. This, as pointed out by Lee,

“makes the habitus much more than merely an elaborate description of a particular cultural locale; the habitus is granted a dynamic and enabling role in the determination of social action. It is both the classifier of social groups as well as being a classifying apparatus belonging to groups: a relatively flexible cognitive framework for making sense of social experiences, and a stable, although never static, set of classifying principles, conditional and variable in relation to time

and space, and upon which a series of generative dispositions may produce a complex repertoire of adaptable methods of cultural taxonomy”. (1993:32)

The habitus, in its flexibility is a vehicle for improvisation, both in practice and classification, but it is nevertheless socially conditioned, i.e., predicated by the latitude of the logic of the social field where it originates and wherein it has been working and moulded. Interpretations, perceptions and means by which to attribute meaning to experiences and manifestations are not an infinite number of alternatives; how the habitus reproduces practices or alters schemas of classification is already inscribed in its character and as such dispositioned.⁽⁵⁾ In other words, the eyes with which we meet and behold phenomena are socially calibrated so as to make sense of it in a manner that corresponds with the framework of the logics to which habitus is inimical and of which it is indeed the generative principle. In its basic interpretation we might say that the habitus is social perception forged by social custom; a custom which is the inculcation of principles of division and undeliberated commonsense, starting at the very earliest stages of an individual’s life and shaped according to experiences associated with the social field wherein trajectories are lived out.

Speaking of classification, Bourdieu emphasises the matter of *interest*; that which one chooses to see. This is pithily pointed out in a stigmatisation model. Bourdieu writes:

“The foundation for the principle of relevance that perception of the social world carries into effect... ..is nothing else than the interest the individuals or groups in questions have in recognising one or the other feature and the observed individuals belonging to the entirety which is being defined by this feature. The interest for what is noticed is never independent from the interest to see this. This is clear regarding classifications that are constructed around a stigmatised feature, which ... isolates the interesting from all other features...which are returned to the grey mass of everything insignificant and therefore is viewed as one and the same.” (Own translation) (1995:231)

Stigmatisation and valorisation are perspectives that will be utilised in analysing and theorising the matter constituting the data. Although I have mentioned the conceptualisation of shared schemas of thought and perception ⁽⁶⁾, I choose personally to conceive of the habitus as the logics of social custom and practice, and significantly in relation to my principal argument of classification and construction of meaning, *a socially homogenous propensity to have certain imageries evoked as mediated by categories embedded in a socially discrete discourse of distinction.*⁽⁷⁾

Symbolic capital

It is the principal theoretical ambition of this study to, on the basis of the case material, demonstrate a relation between a practice of social classification as seen in social discourse and symbolic capital. While Weber had erstwhile problematised traditional class theory as economically deterministic in occupying itself exclusively with groups' and individuals' relative position with regards to production means (Weber, 1947), Bourdieu expands the notion of capital beyond its economic (monetary) reference and implication which emphasizes material conditions and exchanges, to include 'immateriality' and non-economic forms of capital, particularly cultural capital. A premise for this model is that different types of capital can be acquired, exchanged, and converted into other forms of capital.

Cultural capital, which does not exclude economic capital but can be converted into such (normally more so than the other way around) can be achieved and possessed in various ways, or exist in different states. The *embodied* state refers to the internalised competences and perceptions for classifications that is a result of long-term social breeding and investment in knowledge. This state also refers to the bodily objectifications of social structures, reflected in bodily *hexis* to which posture, movement, manners, demeanour and speech associated with a social segment pertain. Cultural capital can be *objectified* in objets d'art, practices (sports, cultural entertainment and leisure activities) and various items representing the aesthetic commoditization that goes into a certain stylisation of life. *Institutionalised*, cultural capital is sought after in formal education, yielding higher value relative to the status enjoyed by the institution issuing a diploma or degree, providing academic credentials and qualifications which create a certificate of cultural competence which confers on its holder a conventional, constant, legally guaranteed value with respect to power. These academic qualifications can then be used as a rate of conversion between cultural and economic capital. Bourdieu defines social capital as the aggregate of the actual or potential resources, which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalised relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition. An individual's social capital is determined by the size of their relationship network, the sum of its cumulated resources (both cultural and economic), and how successfully (quickly) the individual can set them in motion. According to Bourdieu, social networks must be continuously maintained and fostered over time in order for them to be called upon quickly in the future. Finally, in his discussion of conversions between different types of capital, Bourdieu recognizes that all types of capital can be derived from economic capital through varying efforts of

transformation. He also states that cultural and social capital is fundamentally rooted in economic capital but they can never be completely reduced to an economic form. Rather, social and cultural capital remains effective because they conceal their relationship to economic capital. (Bourdieu, 1977, 1998)

Symbolic capital as defined by Bourdieu, is any kind of capital, economic, cultural and social, that is related to *recognition*. Provided a possession, preference, competence, expertise, personal value, an asset or connection is subject to recognition by others, it carries a value in its recognition, and thus becomes a good inscribed with a value and circulating in a symbolic economy. The concept of the symbolic capital is only valid inasmuch as this recognition exists. Failure or non-presence of recognition deprives the goods from being just that, and thus not constituting symbolic capital. Certain forms of capital, like economic, is almost invariably recognised in its value, regardless of the social locus wherein it is considered or exhibited. Other forms of capital are more exclusive to certain segments of the social structure as they are inscribed with no or different meaning outside the group or circle dealing in this particular commodity.

The decisively interesting part of symbolic capital is the factor of conversion. As stated, various forms of capital can be converted into other forms of capital. A title can be bought for a handsome amount of money by a nouveau riche, a college professor of superb academic reputation can demand substantial economic rewards for his chair (Hylland Eriksen, 1998). I hope to illustrate the relationship between the socially located classificatory system, and the segmented and socially discrete self-valorisation of capital, and how individuals and groups are empowered to pass judgment over perceived conversion and modified composite capital. I seek to outline how this contributes to the perpetuation of a general discourse encapsulating concepts instrumental in contextualising the social meaning of relations, practices and preferences.

Matters of method and analytical approaches

Field proceedings

The theme for this text emerged clearly after having roamed the social scape of *profesionales* in Buenos Aires for quite some time. As such, I regard myself socially immersed prior to the initiation of the out and out research process that would entail an analytical glance at almost every conceivable occurrence. I suspect, however, that this immersion had an effect on my research conduct; *how*,

where, when and *what* to sample and extract as pieces of information. This constitutes the first matter of method.

Participation has obviously played a dominant part in my mode of research. This means practically exchanging with informants, and having to record the course of what might constitute an evening (and later an event) after the fact. I have used a tape recorder on a single occasion, and enumerative surveys as well as questionnaires have been dispensed with altogether.

I have, with my closest informants, been a part of their everyday life in most ways. I have tagged along during work, been constantly present in their homes, shared their meals, and taken part in their conversations, even gone away with them on holidays. All of this constitutes social and physical loci from where I have gathered impressions, later processed into data. More periphery informants I have met sporadically on special occasions like going out at night, or other more ritualised events like birthday celebrations.

Anthropology may well start before the sun rises, however, in my case this must refer to writing up data from the night before. My hours of recording have been irregular at best, in that my days have been varied but overall in constant company of one or more close informants. I have not, unless strictly necessary, recorded under interaction and exchange, either between informants or between them and myself, obviously to avoid the intrusiveness of jotting which might cause losing the flow and casualness of the moment.

Observations, sightings, personal experiences and conversations form the basis for the material that constitutes the data. This should be qualified, though. Observations refer to general patterns of social life as I have come to learn it. This is an intimation over time with the lives of the informants and the objective life world around them, as I am able to represent it, in a sociological description of lifestyles and social trajectories. Sightings are special occurrences, poignant incidents whose content can stand out elucidating parts of an observed pattern. It might well be compared to an apt illustration (see Mitchell, 1983). 'Personal experiences' simply refers to an event in which I have taken part or a situation where I have been present. 'Conversations' encapsulates all oral exchanges; interview-like sessions, chats or café tête-à-têtes, and they might come in the form of accounts, narratives, statements, objections, exclamations et cetera.

My informants were in no way ignorant of my agenda. It would seem naïve not to consider the effect my presence had on communication between them, or between informant and researcher, especially with regards to the amount and character of personal information that was submitted in

exchanges. I have since come by withheld information through what has been revealed to me by informants after they have had personal and intimate conversations between them. As the validity of this information has not had direct bearing on the analysis, I have decided not to disqualify or disregard it.

The issue of withheld information requires sensitivity on the part of the researcher towards picking up on subdued exchanges or gestures (Brøgger, 1999). An ability to do this is dependant on close knowledge to the informant. Manipulation of the flow of information, suppression of dark information and individual ways of undertaking certain roles also complicates the process of interpretation (Goffman, 1992). As such, one also relies very much on what one is able to determine as trustworthy information or plausible interpretation coming from primary informants regarding others. At times, I am sure I have run the risk of speculating with ill-founded authority. In the event of inferring or interpreting, I will explain the reason for my induction. In doing so, I leave my writing open to criticism and evaluation, but hopefully based on what is submitted as circumstantial information. I have, all in all, suspended with reading too much into non-action, such as silence, unuttered responses or passiveness that goes against the anticipated gesture.

Remarks on analysis

I aim at providing an image of the objective world wherein *profesionales* experiences are lived out everyday, and furthermore, how this experience is presented through narratives, accounts and statements. The representation of discourses will be a main concern. Discourses constitute social incidents in language, defining them and attributing them meaning by claiming what is actually taking place. As such they are inextricably related to power; of knowledge, definition, legitimisation, negation and so on (Foucault, 1982). Discourses are integral to narratives and spontaneous statements, as both forms reflect and nourish the discourse.

This study does not pretend to undertake a sophisticated discourse analysis; scholars in various parts of linguistics and literature are better equipped for such a task. However, I am looking to see, through the recording of oral renditions, how narratives are constructed and events are constituted in language, and consequently consolidates socially discrete 'knowledge'.⁽⁸⁾ Central to these discourses of distinction are a range of categories. These are semantic entities having to be contextualised in order to grasp the ramifications of their connotations and meanings. In my view, this understanding can only be arrived at through a consideration of the objective conditions, the interpretation of the

subjective experience and a familiarisation with class discourse.

I am not looking for wide representation with my key informants. They *are* similar to most other in my circle of friends and acquaintances with respect to lifestyle and social trajectories. As such, another small group could have constituted the main empirical part. What is of interest, however regarding the socioeconomic setting provided by the current state of affairs in Argentina, is that this group of people represents a wider social segment (*profesionales*) whose positions, resources and customs, I believe, are poignantly illustrating the dynamics and values of symbolic capital conversion in a time when more and more people are being marginalized and deprived of goods conducive to everything from subsistence to standing, and having to make concrete choices as to how to adapt to the unforgiving premises presented by political instability and economic recession.

1

Buenos Aires - a story of great expectations

Potential, persistent affliction and recurring aspiration

Cosmopolitanism as an elite affair with the elsewhere

The following passage is meant to give the reader a general idea of the setting in which the study is conducted. Through the historical presentation, there will emerge an idea of a locally defined cosmopolitanism which has laid at the basis for many conceptualisations of the porteño identity. Porteños is generally used to refer to inhabitants of Buenos Aires, etymologically derived from *puerto* (harbour or port), when the port of the city was central to its activities and identity (9) (Luna, 1998). In terms of resource exploitation, porteños have directed their gaze towards the interior of the country, as oppose to the Atlantic Ocean to which Buenos Aires is connected through the River Plate. Although having one of the longest coastlines in the world, wheat and beef have always been quintessential Argentinean export products. These commodities have always been integral of an Argentinean commercial imagery, so much so that the Argentinean economy has repeatedly been regarded as labouring under the realities of under-industrialisation and under-diversification.(10)

Nevertheless, the immense areas of hitherto untamed, but extremely fertile plains known as La Pampa laid the grounds for the world's arguably most burgeoning economy at the beginning of the 20th century. Between 1880's and 1914 the population of this nation colonised by the Spanish almost 400 years earlier had rose from 3.6 to 7.8 millions. Most of this growth was urban, and Buenos Aires experienced an increase from 600.000 to 1.5 million. By the end of the 19th century there was still accessible land in abundance, unprecedented political stability, and to millions of Europeans experiencing daily hardship of unemployment, land scarcity and famine, Argentine, like United States, represented the best, if not the only alternative for either personal gains or sheer survival. Between 1880 and 1915, Buenos Aires had exploded into being the fastest growing, and the most modern metropolis of the world.(11)

The notion of cosmopolitanism that draws on images of travelling, managing comfortably the daily life of the city, literacy in and knowledge of foreign stylistic expressions and trends, and an aptitude for appropriating the unfamiliar before or just as it is catching on, is a notion that, set in

early 20th century Buenos Aires, was a distinctly upper class project (see Scobie, 1974 and Rock, 1985). Similar to that of United States, the immigration received by Argentina and its capital city included most social segments; rich and poor, investors, merchants and traders, as well as craftsmen and individuals looking for employment. The city that emerged was in many ways one of wealth, opportunity and progress, but there was equally a story of hardship, exploitation, marginality and misery and wretchedness to be told (Rock, 1985). Sheltered, stylised and privileged lives were constructed and led by traditional families and well faring immigrants in the lavish mansions and townhouses in the northern barrios, while rapidly run down, disease ridden areas of the southern barrios housed working class and marginals under severely insalubrious conditions typically characterised by huge numbers of individuals and families sharing tiny rooms or parts of houses.⁽¹²⁾ Buenos Aires, a city whose one third of all inhabitants were born on foreign soil, was already by the first decades in its unprecedented expansion becoming a city of profound contrast.

Following our provisional notion of cosmopolitanism, it seems clear that this urban development forged a privileged lifestyle to which the upper classes principally had access. Although themselves agents of elsewhere and representing other sites through their cultural practices such as language, dress, food, religion and so forth, vast segments of the working class immigration's inexorable proximity to a cut throat daily life struggle effectively precluded their partaking in practices closely related to anything other than necessity.⁽¹³⁾

The expression of an imported affinity

The traditional wealth displayed in the neighbourhood of Recoleta and parts of Palermo and Belgrano to this day is the foremost testament to this elite cosmopolitanism of yore. A series of entire blocks in French Belle Époque architecture, with opulently ornamented facades and lobbies, attended to discretely by impeccably dressed senior or middle aged doormen, is the residential representation of this. Patrician porteños brought French architects to the city to plan and design their homes as well as the new cityscapes of the metropolis, leaving its inner city colonial style a remnant of a time left behind with no place in the new dynamics capturing the relationship between Buenos Aires and Europe. Italian craftsmen were hired to decorate the cornices of the new and lavish buildings that together with vast formalist parks, wide boulevards and avenues, monuments and the first underground train system on the southern hemisphere, constituted the infrastructure that was foreign in its influences and the spatial boundaries wherein elite cosmopolitanism and middle

class practice of imagination could take place (Scobie, 1974).

Buenos Aires had a cultural offer and nightlife thought to be surpassed only by New York and Paris at the time. Restaurants, theatres, operas, varieties and of course dance halls, brothels and bawdy houses were all a part of the offer catering to the porteños in this period (Archetti, 1999). The wealthiest families, mostly landowning elite residing in the city ⁽¹⁴⁾, would go on month-long holidays to Paris and London, staying in the finest hotels, bringing with them their own stock of cattle for supplies, and Argentina as an exporting nation figured as a creditor for several western European countries, among them England.

These cultural imports of architecture, public and private spatial ornamentation, dress sense, popular practices, philosophy and entertainment, remind us in various ways of the scapes by which Appadurai conceptualises flow of globalisation. What should not be overlooked is that the cosmopolitanism as practiced and imagined through the stylisation of life and the concomitant communication of an affinity with the agents of elsewhere, constituted a modernity. These agents were not romanticised and outdated fantasies about some promised land. They were the latest expressions and forms of metropolitan life as experienced in the metropolitan par excellence for city dwellers of recent or older European descent, namely Paris. As such, the porteño cosmopolitanism of which the patrician porteños were proponents was inextricably linked to and inherent of a modernity as manifested through consumption; of ideas, objects and practices. Not only spending time in Paris, but actually bringing her to Buenos Aires, cultivating an emotional relationship to her practices and symbols neither exclusively there nor here, but effortlessly in both places, lead us to conceptualise an early 20th century porteño cosmopolitanism as decisively linked to the elite consumption of modernity, but decisively narrow and limited in the scope of influence.⁽¹⁵⁾

Economical woes, political instability and social conflict

This brief passage is meant to provide a mere idea of the abruptness by which the changes of the preceding decade of the 1990's could be experienced and conceptualised, by outlining a political and economic trajectory that constitutes a background for recent cultural developments in Buenos Aires. Cosmopolitanism and modernity in Buenos Aires find their condition in matrixes of correlating political, economical and social factors. The roaring decades of prosperity at either side of the turn of the 20th century, and a modern cosmopolitanism of elitist cultural transnational mimesis found its conditions radically altered throughout the long period that in many ways saw its beginning around

the time of the WW1.⁽¹⁶⁾ It is impossible to separate these factors into an analysis suggesting their autonomy and independent causes and consequences. Master historical narratives of Argentina reflecting the period between 1920 and 1990, weave together interrelating factors; the dialectics of political instability, under-institutionalisation (see O'Donnell, 2001), de-democratisation and persistent and recurring economic ailments. Social conflict, as exemplified by impoverishment, civil oppression and class antagonisms also must be seen in relation to the political and economical currents of a trajectory that spans over many decades, and according to numerous scholars, find its antecedents in preceding centuries (see Schumway, 1991).

Until 1929 the Argentinean economy was still in growth, and the nation was established among the world's leading exporters of agricultural produce.⁽¹⁷⁾ The standard of living among the nation's population compared favourably with western Europe, as large segments of the population experienced prosperity and well-being.⁽¹⁸⁾ Large numbers of immigrants again resulted in the rapid expansion of the population.⁽¹⁹⁾ As neutral throughout WW1, Argentina suffered no physical harm, but it could not escape the war's highly disruptive economic consequences. The Argentinean economy and financial sphere was already characterised and heavily defined by foreign capital investment. The post-war period brought the country little nearer integrated industrialisation, and the country remained a primary producer vulnerable to international conditions of trade and dependant on stable relations of imports and exports. Argentina was developing a close association with the United States for imports, it remained heavily dependant on Britain for its export earnings (see Shumway, 1991; Rock, 1985; Luna, 2000).

Politically, Argentina was a constitutional republic with limited democratic flavour, until the 1912 passing of the Saenz Pena law granted universal male suffrage. From 1916 to 1930 the *Radicales* ⁽²⁰⁾ were in power, but were relieved of this by the military uprising of 1930. Seriously affected by the world depression of the 1930's, the nation still figured among the ten richest countries in the world. However, wealth was more than ever concentrated among the landed elite and commercial bourgeoisie. Even these segments found their lifestyles hard to sustain during these years, and many of the most spectacular private mansions were in the course of this decade sold to foreign states to serve as embassies. The political strategies and methods as undertaken by the conservatives and their military associates throughout the decade saw the emergent middle classes of primarily immigrant background deprived of any effective share in their own country's wealth and government.

A series of military coups in 1943-44, saw the rise of Colonel Juan Peron, the new political strongman basing his power on a strong alliance between the military and labour forces.⁽²¹⁾ His popularity among the popular masses was significantly achieved through the assistance of his wife Eva Duarte, a relatively unknown actress who had risen to fame through her romantic association with Peron. Clearly an adept public speaker, she rallied the masses in support for her husband both during his incarceration and his time in the political top office. No historical accounts have ever doubted the determination and fervour with which she sided with the working class in their struggle for better living conditions, many though, have questioned both the motives of her ambition and the commendability of her accomplishments.⁽²²⁾

In 1946 Peron was elected president for the first time. In both scholarly and popular historical narratives, his government is mainly remembered for improving working class living conditions. Decisively nationalistic, arguably fascistic, these descriptions are commonly sought illustrated in a few defining economic and political feats; repatriating capital investments and businesses and relieving the railroads from British ownership, and if not overtly siding with, at least perceived to be sympathising with the axis powers during the WW2.⁽²³⁾ The authoritarian and oppressive side to Peron's rule has similarly been captured by the prohibition and banning of political opponents and large segments of the press, characteristically muting sources of political critique.⁽²⁴⁾

Although re-elected in 1951, Peron faced unsustainable trouble; exacerbated economic woes mainly as a result of embargoes, ill-anticipated international politics and concomitant commercial difficulties led to the introduction of a wage freeze, in turn causing uprising among the labour unions who had been situated at the core of Peronist political support.⁽²⁵⁾ The death of Eva Peron in 1952 dealt another blow to his popular support as his character had been sought mythified by the charismatic and fervently demagogical efforts of his wife. Peron was ousted by the military, and he went into European exile after a coup in 1955.

Between 1955 and 1973, Peron's legacy left the population deeply divided. Peronists and Anti-Peronists constituted a bitter and all encompassing political and social antagonism. Instability characterised this period on several levels. The economy was struggling primarily in high inflation rates and a spiralling foreign debt, and the armed forces that by now had established traditions for involving themselves in politics faced internal division, further enhancing an air of uncertainty in the society at large. Specifically, this political instability manifested itself over the course of less than 20 years in the alternation of three military and two civilian, constitutional regimes.

After the military assumed power in 1966, there had emerged a violent and tense climate wherein politically subversive actions and out and out guerrilla warfare had aided in the discrediting of the government.⁽²⁶⁾ The most recent of military leaders relinquished power in 1973, when Hector Campora won the elections for the Peronists. Peron however had been closely monitoring the proceedings from Spain, and by the aid of his collaborators in Argentina was reinstated as president shortly after the elections. His death the following year precluded any achievement other than alienating the Peronist groups in the guise of young subversives who had confronted the military establishment under his political endorsement and advent. In the chaotic and unclear situation that emerged, a military junta in March 1976 again resumed power, after Isabel, third wife of Peron was relieved of the mandate she had had transferred from her late husband.

The rule of the military junta stand synonymous to what is referred to as “the dirty war” or *el proceso* as referred to by the regime itself. Not only guerrilla warfare, but every action suspected in any way to subvert or oppose the regime was met with severe brutality. However, this was a war without bloody battlefields and scattered victims, rather that of raids, sudden strikes and disappearances.⁽²⁷⁾ Four high ranking officers succeeded one another at the supreme political helm over a period of 7 years, as the military restored their idea of law and order, but failed to stagger the recurring, accumulated and proliferated economic problems that had long since marred the state. By 1980 it was evident that their policies were impotent, and what confidence remained among the population was gradually waning. Trying to distract and divert attention from domestic matters⁽²⁸⁾, a military invasion of the South Atlantic Falkland Islands in 1982 ended in disaster for the regime ⁽²⁹⁾, who shortly after succumbed to the popular pressure of reinstating civilian rule and democratic elections in 1983.⁽³⁰⁾

A strong vying for human and civil rights, ideas promoting the infallibilities and almost magical substance of democracy, as well as the still recent images of the last Peronist project, saw the *Radicales* assume power after half a century in more or less political limbo. However, throughout the remainder of the 1980’s it became evident that a relentless belief in democracy and social justice in itself had little to offer in the struggle against hyperinflation and foreign debt. In 1989, Peronism would return to the political zenith in the guise of the presidential candidate of el Partido Justicialista ⁽³¹⁾, as Carlos Menem overtook the presidency for the next six years.

At long last love

With the arrival of Menem came the unleashing of neoliberalism (32), and late 20th century private and corporate capitalism manifested itself quickly in most ways in everyday life of Buenos Aires' citizens. According to Tulchin (1998), Argentina was made a satellite in the orbit of USA, and he refers to the pegging of the local currency to the dollar, mass privatisation of public institutions and services and an opening up of the domestic markets to primarily US imports and capital. It has also been observed that what took place was a post-Fordisation of an economy that was never Fordist in the first place (Guano, 2002).⁽³³⁾ What is beyond dispute is that Menem managed to control the inflation rates, providing economic predictability for Argentineans who recently had been experiencing price adjustments in supermarkets announced on the speaker system, not knowing what they would have to pay by the time they reached the check out. A credit system was effectively established as a conglomerate of foreign banks entered to accommodate and make a profit on the new porteño consumer who's most enticing trait was a newfound confidence in the economy and propensity for indulging in the flow of commodities and services he had hitherto been deprived of.

Under Menem's economic policies, Buenos Aires was again a hugely attractive site for foreign investment. Both the cityscape and people's lives were changed within this new socioeconomic framework. Infrastructure-wise, road systems were expanded and modernised, extensively financed by toll. Making their way on these roads were now porteños in new and imported cars. A new corporate skyline in the downtown harbour area was erected, bringing international financial giants like banking houses, insurance companies, IT multinationals and so forth to the city, and symbolising their presence was this sleek, supremely modern cluster of glass and steel in an up to then old-fashioned and commercially inactive area. A host of globally known brand names followed suit and established branches and offices in the city. In the same way other urban waterfronts have been transformed (34), the abandoned docklands of Puerto Madero was completely restructured and redesigned. This wasteland, a sombre testament to abandoned marine- and shipyard activity was made into a vast area of endless promenades of restaurants, bars and discos, hotels and corporate buildings, luxurious apartment buildings, a floating casino and cleaned-up quays locating elegant marinas for private yachts and adorned with bridges for strolling, constructed with a seductively sleek, modern architectonic expression. A refurbished service and consumer society of foreign capital catered to porteños in most ways imaginable; bank accounts, life insurances, cable- and internet subscriptions, *hipermercados* (35), fast food lunches and gourmet soirees, designer wear and

happy hours in Irish pubs were all on offer in the part and parcel modernity underlining the lifestyles being constructed within the premises laid down by economic measures implemented throughout the 1990's.

Profesionales was a segment of the population for which the new times seemed tailor-made. With a stabilised and regulated system of wages, individuals of extensive education operating within the liberal service economy found themselves well positioned and with access to the goods and practices as associated with elsewhere that once again came to be testament to the lifestyle of success; lavish housing, high wages, insignificant taxation, imported cars, going to the movies and eating out frequently, shopping at whim, and going abroad on extensive holidays. Portenos were again, most of them for the first time, living the cosmopolitan experience; Buenos Aires was opening up and burgeoning in new, optimistic and large scale enterprise. It must be noted that once again, modernity limited itself to the city of Buenos Aires as the rural regions of the provinces scarcely noticed the neoliberalism of the federal capital. In this process, the differences between the city, and principally the more affluent parts of it, and the interior, were further accentuated by diverging affinities and orientations, reiterating the urban distinction instrumental to a reinvention of porteño cosmopolitanism.

Buenos Aires modernity was redefined, and with it the imaginary framework for porteño cosmopolitanism. In contrast to the earliest decades of the 20th century, this modernity was not marked by inaccessibility precluding the indulgence for others than the landed elite and the urban bourgeoisie. This time the affair with the elsewhere was perceived as something in which the middle classes could partake. As such, management and possession of the concomitant goods and practices effectively became a mark by which class was determined and communicated. The construction of middle class lifestyle was no longer middle class mimicry of the elite, rather a direct appropriation of and indulgence in what was on direct offer, mediated by the unleashed and ubiquitous advertising industry; on cable TV, in cinemas, in glossy magazines and enormous roadside billboards.

Inequality rearticulated

The city of Buenos Aires has always been at odds with the rest of the country that it federally governs, even from the time it reluctantly was named the nation's capital (Luna, 1998). It is hard to question its status as political, economical and cultural centre of the nation. With Greater Buenos Aires' more than 13 million inhabitants, it is conforming to the demographic patterns of elsewhere

Latin American urbanisation, considering the entire population of this vast country totals no more than 40 million. However, from an informant perspective these statistics are cause for grave concern. They know that Argentina has had a population growth in the last two decades of an explosive character, and that this population increase has been more or less synonymous with proliferation of poverty. The metropolis daily adds to its poor by the constant influx of individuals and families either from other provinces, or from neighbouring countries. The former often settling in more or less permanently in the *villas miserias* ⁽³⁶⁾(shantytowns) in and around the city, the latter daily forming long lines at the offices of the immigration authorities, before trying to make a living within the informal economy.⁽³⁷⁾ The pull effect of the capital also sees the arrival of students, craftsmen and *profesionales*.

The disenfranchised and marginalised are becoming evermore visible throughout the city. Children asking for change at every street corner, begging for the last sip of a coke inside a McDonald's restaurant, whole families roaming the streets at night collecting paper and cardboard waste for recycling, or the ubiquitous 5-seconds windscreen washers at every traffic light regulated junction, demonstrate their own strategies and improvisations in their daily survival. At least, this is one way of looking at it. As we shall see, not everyone concurs, and the observations and discourses on social realities come in many different shades and calibrations.

It has been argued that the social polarisation was exacerbated under Menem (Svampa, 1992, Sarlo, 1994 and Guano, 2002), and that what the president's project possessed in audacity and enterprise from an economic point of view, it lacked correspondingly in terms of social or welfare concerns, thus shaping a society in the longer run favouring the few rather than the many. The national industries and shop keepers being run into bankruptcy and out of business by multinational capital and corporate endeavour produced alarming rates of unemployment (Guano, 2002). A welfare system that had been significantly privatised and hence inaccessible for those without means meant that the polarisation of the middle classes, or at least the process of further social differentiation was well underway.⁽³⁸⁾ Gibson has summed up the Buenos Aires of the 90's as resembling an asymmetrical hourglass with a tiny and wealthy elite on the top, and the unemployed workers and poor masses at the bottom (Gibson, 1998). This is an image also dropping hints at middle class fall from grace.

Guano, in her "Spectacles of Modernity" (2002), analyses the mass importation of first world commodities to Argentina during the 90's and, the middle classes' hyper consumption of these. She

observes the process where porteños could again, through consumption, identify with places and people of elsewhere, instead of accepting a fate as undifferentiated from the rest of Latin America. She claims that local traditions for the imagining of the elsewhere produce discourses wherein inequality are legitimised under the guise of modernity.

“...the new cityscape of Buenos Aires is a locus, a medium, and a tool of the hegemonic attempt to mould *porteño* citizenship into the cast of neoliberalism. Not an epiphany of the “global homogenisation” and the “Americanisation” many fear, this reterritorialization of the metropolis in Buenos Aires is rather the product of very much a local hegemonic imagination - one that utilizes the discourse of “modernization” to legitimise inequality.” (Guano, 2002)

Guano draws the parallel between neoliberal and “Parisian” Buenos Aires. From this perspective, consumption, trends and stylisation of life comes under the cloak of modernisation, which again is locally conceptualised as such by imagination of “the symbols of elsewhere” (Bhabha cited in Clifford, 1997:42). The symbols of modernity at the turn of the century were the ideas, dress, houses and practices exhibited by the wealthy elite in Buenos Aires. These were by all means not available to all, on the contrary, but they provided a nexus between *symbols of elsewhere*, modernity and dominant discourses of aesthetics. As it so happens, the philosophical currents imported were that of positivism, conveniently conducive to progress and evolution in most forms, so that innovations and trends (as endorsed by the elite) had ideological legitimacy installed upon their arrival.

Guano characterises an uncritical endorsement and appropriation of these new symbols within the middle classes. The new inequality she speaks of is that experienced by many middle class porteños in most recent years, and the inaccessibility that defines their relationship to this modernity taking place. I find there are limitations to her line of argument. Even though this hegemonic imagination is local, and the stylisation of life through cultural imports may result in social inequality, Guano fails to consider the *pre-existing local discourse of social distinction*. We have to assume a critical stance towards an argument that conflates the indulgence in modernity and a collective project of differentiated groupings and classes striving to obtain the same symbols, emulating the same practices, valorising the same expression and doing it identically. This view subordinates the social connotations carried in objects and practices and the propensity these connotations have in turning taste into distaste, to wrongly depict a one-dimensional, unconditionally vertical cultural and social mimesis based on the belief that desire can be stereotyped and find its expression in a single motive.

The Peronists lost the 1999 elections to the *Radicales* at a time when Menem was facing accusations of arm smuggling and severe corruption. The son of Syrian merchants was kept in house arrest pending his trial (the lawsuit has since been withdrawn on lack of evidence). He made sure to remain in the headlines of the society press by marrying a former miss Chile several decades his junior, and presently has managed to make himself the most probable Peronist candidate for the upcoming election in 2003.⁽³⁹⁾ Remaining Peronist party leader up until today, his political machinations and potential successes are not only a major headache for Duhalde (the current Peronist caretaker president who lost the election in 1999 with the explicit lack of support from Menem, but nevertheless took office after the *Radicales* again abandoned power in 2001), but also for a wide range of Argentines and porteños alike. Many remain doubtful that his charisma and seductive powers can move the mountain standing in the country's way in the form of a crippling foreign debt (the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank being the principal creditors) and escalating social unrest caused by unemployment and social marginalisation.

In the aftermath of the collapse (December 2001) of the De La Rúa government (president of the *Radicales-FREPASO* alliance) life has become increasingly difficult for millions of people throughout the country. The *Radicales* implemented banking curb restrictions in order to stop the capital flight draining the financial foundation of the nation. Limiting of cash withdrawals from bank accounts was a severe blow to the informal side of the economy amounting to an estimated 50 percent of the daily transactions. Many of these people both of lower *and* middle class found themselves in crisis of income, as a result of the imposed shortage of cash circulating in the economy.⁽⁴⁰⁾ In the continuation, Duhalde released the peso from the dollar-peg, and the subsequent devaluation lead to an inflation further worsening the already desperate situation in which many found themselves. For those who managed to hold on to work, salaries stayed the same but prices soared. Obviously, only those with high incomes prior to this development could sustain the situation reasonably well. For millions of others, the realities were anything but viable.

Differentiated experiences and heterogeneity of meaning

This work deals mainly with the lives of many of *those who benefited* from the premises laid down by the Menem administration and his minister of finance Domingo Cavallo.⁽⁴¹⁾ Many of them do not long for Menem, however they are ready to welcome back a number of the measures that to them meant a stable economy, providing them with a lifestyle never before being associated with a notion

of middle class citizens.⁽⁴²⁾

In contemporary popular discourse, Menem is acknowledged for his entrepreneurship and intrepidity, but at the same time discredited and lambasted for the way he has involved himself in corruption. As both a porteño and *profesional*, Carlos, a 54 year-old accountant and two times voter for Menem, has disclosed he will not vote for Menem in the upcoming elections.⁽⁴³⁾ He has his office at the plant of his biggest client, Caldini, an Italian immigrant turned industrialist after he came to Argentina in the late 1940's. The family company produces kitchen stoves, exclusively for the domestic market. Carlos offers some of his views on the Menem era:

"The point is, his first term was very good. He did a lot of good things. He stabilised the economy, killed off the inflation... and people got a lot of services they never had the chance to have. Look... people were fed up with the way things were... Phones never working, power cuts that lasted all day, domestic made cars that were more like carts...you never knew what was going to happen. People say he was wrong with the privatisation, I don't know. Granted, he screwed the *comerciantes* (small businesses and shop keepers)... life was made harder for them, but listen, they had been sitting too pretty up to then... it doesn't make sense that a shop keeper has a higher income than a *profesional*, you see what I mean? *Bancarios* (finance community), entrepreneurs and *profesionales*, yes, all drew great advantage of the Menem years, *comerciantes* and industries... well, he screwed them. But then again, how many people were working in the industry? Really there weren't that many, and besides, you know... the Argentinean industry was an anachronism, and still is, what's left of it. Our industrialists never knew how to modernise or invest. It's the same today. Caldini for example, could earn 10 times more than he does, but he doesn't have the right... aptitude to do it. He lost that French contract you know because the production mode with the old machines at the plant didn't convince the guys from Paris..."

Carlos' account is common among *profesionales* in Buenos Aires. He condemns Menem's actions of his second term, but defends the presidency in focusing on his accomplishments. The social strain scholars have argued was a result of the last decade, is justified in the informant's narrative constructed out of a different perspective. Argentina finally arrived into new times, in that social services actually worked, such as electricity and telephony. In other words, porteños were offered the same reliability in service management as citizens of other modernised western countries. Furthermore, justifications for the economic restructuring are made through another argument; aware of the numerous bankruptcies suffered by small businesses, Carlos speaks from his conviction that *profesionales* should anyway be better off than shopkeepers. This to him is so obvious that he doesn't care to elaborate. I have in conversation with other *profesionales* found their expectancies of

pay off on their investment in education as a uniform legitimisation of this view. Furthermore, national enterprise is regarded substandard and not competitive, even his own client. Carlos uses the example of Caldini as illustrative of the national industry, which based on his personal orientation and values, were put out of their misery more so than economically annihilated as suggested by mentioned scholars.

Compared to the Europe many porteños historically has felt part of, or the USA that now has established itself as the main provider of lifestyles, it is safe to say that none of the Latin American nation-states noticed the efficacies of unhampered system critique and social morphology expressed by and evident in new commodity forms and a multilateral flow of cultural exchanges that characterises postmodernity. Decisively not Fordist throughout the post-war decades, definitely undemocratic, if there were a passage into post-modernity for Argentina, it was short, abrupt and even though not bloody, certainly violent. In the sociopolitical climate that has existed in Argentina for most of the second part of the 20th century, it is implausible to conceive of the possible emergence of postmodern alternative aesthetic and cultural forms, as their state-staged oppression would readily have reacted against what could easily have been deemed subversive in content. Williams (1962) refers to a “structure of feeling” in conceptualising how nations develop a continuous and gradual awareness of change; a cultural sensibility towards new forms and practices emerging under socioeconomic and cultural vicissitudes. Considering this notion with special reference to Argentina and Buenos Aires, the postmodern experience, the latest of the latest, was introduced following dramatic economic restructuring, but without the historical and temporal antecedents of passages enabling a nation to develop the “structure of feeling necessary” for the “collective sensibilities” *that facilitate attributing meaning to new forms and practices through the gradual familiarisation of these*. The argument arising out of this, and which I will pursue further, is that postmodern expressions of emergent cultural forms were subjected to hegemonic discourses already characteristic of and inherent in the Argentinean class structure, in having social meaning attributed to them. This also implies that we need to more closely consider the concept of the porteño, in what way it transcends contextuality, and to what extent it plays on ambiguity.

2

Grasping the porteño identity

Elusive and typical - paradoxes of popular definitions

Existence of the category in the awareness of others

Inasmuch as millions of porteños share the awareness of each other without ever actually meeting but a very small percentage of their fellow citizens, the existence of the porteño and the conception of this character prevails, as with other territorially and locally defined groups of peoples, through the *imagination* of his practices and orientations.⁽⁴⁴⁾ Anonymously but spatially connected people every day imagining others going the same places, seeing the same sights, scenting the same smells, create an awareness of others immersed in similar projects to oneself; the idea of shared practices and shared experiences are instrumental to the perception of a community, whether social, professional, ethnic etc. The awareness, or idea of a set of practices and orientations personified in the porteño is both perpetuated and rearticulated in a number of ways. The porteño is a category that figures in almost everything that is written about Buenos Aires, from newspaper articles to travel books, poetry, novels and academic prose. All these accounts mentioning or discussing the porteño, or attempting to describe him, constitute a vast body of literature of older and newer date. Younger informants all get acquainted with this term that long precedes them in existence, as they themselves negotiate its meaning through new scapes of practices, ideas and people.

The porteño in the literature

Several of the concepts and categories about to be introduced as referred to in various non-academic publications will later be subjected to more careful analysis. There are innumerable attempts in different prose to describe the porteño or to catch the essence of this category, and there exist many variants of the imagined porteño zest. Tracing the porteño in native and foreign literature, it would appear that the trouble observers have run into while trying to pin down the porteño is due to a neglect of the fact that porteños cannot be made a socially homogenous community, but rather, that his definition is contingent upon social context.

Characterised by expatriate Màrmol in his novel *Amalia* published already in 1840 as "these porteño people who pass with facility from tears to laughter, from being serious to puerile, from great things to triviality; a people of Spanish blood and French mind", this quotation finds its echo in porteños themselves more than a hundred and fifty years on. Both locals and foreigners have picked up on the joke that porteños speak Spanish, eat Italian, think they are French and dress with a sense of British conservatism/want to be British (this has been corrupted in numerous quotes, one will hear different variants). Although a popularised myth, the joke does suggest an idea held by porteño himself of an eclectic identity, drawing on several European influences and cultivating them within the boundaries of their own urban locale. Also hinted at in Màrmol's less favouring passage is the association of porteños with transient behaviour. In a city where everyone talks about corruption, this aspect is also reflected in porteños' concern with their reputation of unpredictability and hence untrustworthiness. Like Dora told me, a housewife in her fifties, "*Somos muy exitistas, we change from the euphoric to the depressive very quickly, all too often without any sober thoughts about the realities of the situation in which we find ourselves*".

The Scottish adventurer Cunningham Graham penned his encounters with the porteño upper class in the 1870`s portraying them as; "thinking of themselves as the first of humankind, scorning English *gringos*, Italian *carcamanos*, Spanish *gallegos* and Brazilian *macacos* (monkeys)." He told of women and men being segregated, the former only leaving the house to go to mass. Men would congregate, smoke and talk scandal, while the girls would be seated on chairs "whispering in undertones and managing their fans". This is a view of an upper class despising the immigrants that already were arriving and settling in the country en masse. Whether this porteño upper class exhibited behaviour vastly distinct from similarly socially situated citizens in other corners of the world is open to debate. Of course today, descendants of immigrants from this era comprise the majority of porteños, and many would argue that the core qualities of the character are those of inhabitants very much shaped and given its identity by the immigrant city.

The Spanish philosopher and writer José Ortega y Gasset claimed to find the porteño typicality in the male *guarango*,

"a person who demonstrates an enormous appetite to become someone admirable, superlative, even unique, but in failing to attain this desired reputation, has turned aggressive. Hence, the *guarango* is a person brimming with and fuelled by imagined superiority over the rest" (sited in Wilson, 2000).

This might be a case of self-deception or unrealistic ideas of grandeur, a pretender concealing own

shortcomings with arrogance, and still a victim of the imagined desirability that would grant him what he wants. In the 50's, Eva Peron was called a *guaranga* by her class enemies. It is a known fact that the porteño elite never accepted Eva Peron in their circles, treating her like an uneducated and vulgar opportunist of the lower classes. Maybe Evita herself complied with the label, as she turned aggressive and hateful on the upper classes. According to my informants, the notion of the *guarango* has taken on a more specific meaning over the years, indeed, today it mainly denotes the vulgar and uncivilised manners of a commoner, and not so much the desire for being admired.

According to Wilson (Wilson, 2000), another figure made central in porteño narratives is the *compradito*. However, the *compradito* was a more or less lawless male living in the dangerous outskirts of the city, roaming the downtown neighbourhoods in search of women and excitement (Archetti, 1999). Argentina's most celebrated author, Jorge Luis Borges, and Roberto Arlt have both written about this character, and he has been made legendary through the romanticisation by tango lyrics. Scalabrini Ortiz drew on this exaggerated macho character when writing about the porteño man in his *El hombre que está solo y espera* (The man who is alone and waiting, 1931), and examined his macho stare, rampant individualism, constant improvisation with an inclination for judging the person over ideas and giving primacy to intuition over intellect. It should be noted that aggressive masculinity or propensity for violence is traditionally not referred to in porteño narratives.

The notion of individualism, however, is a recurring one over the entire 20th century. Cultural nationalists like Rojas, Galvez and Ibarguren emphasised it in lamenting the emerging times in Argentina at the beginning of last century, vitriolically criticising the immigrant as a selfish exploiter, a usurper lacking in respect of the values of his new soil and only interested in making his fortune at the expense of others (Archetti, 1999 and DeLaney, 2002). Progressive and conservative porteño observers are drawing a contemporary parallel, pointing at the repercussions of neoliberalism manifesting themselves in what they claim to be abundance of egoism and lack of solidarity throughout the society in general and in *la city porteña* in particular. On this point, they have something in common with the nationalist writers of yore, who in their time singled out both elitist cosmopolitanism and immigrant material struggle for criticism. Judging persons over ideas has been addressed by native historian Felix Luna as what he believes to be one of the great curses of Argentinean political history, namely the stronghold of the *personalismo* (Luna, 2000); the public's repeated ill fated infatuations with charismatic leaders as oppose to sober ideas and holistic

agendas.⁴¹

Several authors have indeed tried to make allowances for the idea that the porteño comes in many forms and does not confine itself to strict definitions. Marxist writer Juan José Sebrelli identified

"the *medio-pelo*, or middle class upstart who could be a rich industrialist or a general, decried by the supposedly aristocratic, to the *petiterismo* or snobs associated with Avenida Santa Fe's Petit Café in the 1950's who mimicked upper class taste and fashions" (Sebrelli cited in Wilson, 2000).

The cultural nationalist Galvez known for his romantic ideals of nationhood and telluric native spirit in the first part of the 1900's also identified a variety of porteños, however he mockingly singled out the type of porteño who is an admirer of success, and ridiculed him in his naive way of doing so (Galvez, 1889). This clearly resembles the native concept of *cholulaje*, a practice personified in the *cholulo/a*. Having its simple origin in a seemingly obscure (although I was made aware of this by an informant, almost none of my other informants have heard of this) comic strip called *Cholula Starfan*, revolving around a young girl obsessed with the lives of celebrities, *cholulaje*, or *ser cholulo* (to be *cholulo/a*) has broadened its connotation. The concept still refers to the desire and efforts by a number of people to mingle with celebrities and be regarded as part of the jet set circuit (*la farandula*). Furthermore, *cholulaje* can refer to what many porteños admit to as their extreme relationship to things foreign; a preoccupation with how one is perceived, a celebration of and predisposition for the imported representations of the imagined elsewhere. *Cholulaje* is at the same time being selective *and* uncritical; selective in the sense that an object of desire, pastime or trend has to strike rapport with a certain social segment, uncritical often in the appropriation according to what is implied necessary for the legitimate appreciation (which translates more or less to "it's trendy, so it's cool"). The glance of the others (the imagined elsewhere and local fashion police) is weighing heavy, and it might be added in these passages that tango did not gain acceptance or popularity with the middle classes of Buenos Aires until it triumphantly returned from its European tour, sanitised and de-eroticised in 1920's Paris (Savigliano, 1995); Borges did not attain mentionable success at home until after he won the Formentor prize with Samuel Beckett in 1961, and national motion pictures otherwise struggling to draw crowds to the theatres produce full houses whenever an Oscar nomination is added on the billboard.⁽⁴⁵⁾

A popularised concept in porteño narratives and one figuring in almost all native responses as to what defines the porteño is the ability to *ser vivo* (to be clever, vivacious, street smart). Medical doctor and writer Florencio Escardó saw the "mental agility" and "rapid communication" as typical of the porteño. There are several apt illustrations of this *viveza* (cunning, wit) manifesting itself in daily life on the streets of Buenos Aires. Spanish novelist Delibes noted in the 50's the practice of bumping the cars together leaving no space in between, due to the shortage of parking space, leading everyone to leave their cars without using the parking break. I have myself observed this on numerous occasions. As a result of this practice, many people will not invest in a new car unless they have access to a garage in their apartment building, as this is the only way to be certain to avoid dents in the chassis of their cars. Everybody seems resigned to the widespread existence of this practice, and can only shrug while commenting it. However, they recognise it as a lamentable porteño feature, one that leads to "lack of respect for others' property". *Viveza* doesn't only relate to improvised action (that after a while becomes convention) but also speech. It has also been observed that in porteño argumentative form, the only thing that matters is the "lightening riposte" (Meyer cited in Wilson, 2000), suggesting that problem solving takes subsidiary importance to presenting arguments with evasion and persuasion (Archetti, 1999). France characterised the *viveza criolla* (native wit) as "Creole cunning", artful lying and cheating, with footballer Diego Maradona as the supreme incarnation (France, 1998). She failed though to recognise that *ser vivo* is a feature associated with the immigrant more so than the descendant of Indians and Spanish colonisers. The term encapsulating the contrast to *vivo* is *boludo* (heavy balls). One will be subject to this more or less transitory characterisation in a number of situations; everything from letting a good opportunity pass by, acting with a lack of foresight or being generally hesitant or out of words.

Also prominent in porteño narratives and accounts (and often used in discussions with reference to politicians) is the *chanta*, a character derived from the noun *chantaje*, literally meaning blackmail but most typically denoting fraud, small scale shams and trickery. A *chanta* is a person who will blatantly offer you assurances and never having the intention to keep his word. His business is shady to the core and dishonesty is his main quality. The linkage between *ser vivo* and *chanta* is hard to ignore. Archetti (1999) illustrates a morality of the *vivo* in locating this concept in national narratives of football. Here we are acquainted with a morality that has little or nothing to do with good deeds, however, it prescribes actions and a style that answers to its own logic of how a performance *ought to be*.⁽⁴⁶⁾ This performance should be given its identity by trickery, improvisation

and use of gambits. Hence the normative aspect generates a collective understanding that operates within a shared morality. That improvisation, trickery and cunning is conducive to a street smart and clever behaviour is beyond doubt, however, contextualised differently they can be lamented as the core values of the undermining of collective spirit and social solidarity. Contemporary Argentinean writer and ambassador to Spain, Abel Posse, directs a full-fledged attack on the *viveza* in a column written for the weekly magazine issue of *La Nación* (47):

"In Buenos Aires... the *viveza* defined itself as the matrix of every kind of corruption. We betrayed, robbed and alienated this state to which we owe our own invention and the short cohesion of the land formed by all bloods. It was a specimen of Frankenstein that was going really rather well... but for the *viveza porteña* we paid a dear price. The *viveza* is nothing but the bastard niece of intelligence. (Everyone looked stupid or slow compared to *our* cleverness and ways of knowing-it-all: from the North Americans to the pachyderm Scandinavians" (own translation).

This is the narrative of the small-scale *chantaje* and the wholesale corruption nascent in the *viveza*, as this category came to sum up the every day practice of taking shortcuts, speculating and trickery that every porteño is acknowledging as *a typical aspect of other porteños*.

Interestingly, the melancholic, serious and restrained male, is also made to be typical porteño in various renditions. This is also the masculine figure portrayed by numerous tango lyrics (Archetti, 1999), almost invariably left by a women only to find solace in the cultivation of a subsequent phase of sombre self pity and the expected intervention of a higher justice. Marechal in his novel *Adán Buenosayres* referred to this constraint stating that "Buenos Aires is an archipelago of island-men unable to talk to each other". Nicaraguan poet Rubén Darío observed as early as 1890 the Argentineans as "cold and indifferent". Borges too admitted to this "Argentinean reserve, distrust and reticence", the "difficulty we have in making confessions, in revealing our intimate nature". Wilson poses the question whether this image of the urban Argentinean of the 40`s, a "clone of Borges himself and certainly an anglophile", still convey the porteño. He considers this by referring to the *engominados* that still can be observed; brilliant men clad in tailor-made suits or tweed jackets regardless of the temperatures, "but they are dwindling, surviving mainly in the City, the financial quarter, or as diplomats representing Argentina abroad" (Wilson, 2000).

In María Vargas Llosa's witty novel *La tía Julia y el escribidor* (Aunt Julia and the scriptwriter, 1985), the Argentineans exemplified by the porteños were characterised as pompous and pretentious by this Peruvian writer. Argentina is the butt of many jokes throughout the Latin American

continent, often poking fun at the widespread belief that Argentina is really a part of Europe, and has correspondingly little or nothing in common with its poorer, dark-skinned, indigenous-influenced neighbours. The aspect of affinity and perceived belongingness to Europe, as we already know, figures relentlessly in porteño narratives of self and others.

These are but a few literary examples cited to present notions that have established themselves at the core of the most common narratives on and by porteños. As illustrated, many of these categorisations find their echo and reproduction in current discourse, and furthermore, the conformity of their referrals transcends generations.

Individual reflections on *ser porteño*

As has been this researcher's experience, most informants will think of themselves, and other porteños with reference to a number of these stereotypes, however, it is contingent upon context. Some characterisations are undoubtedly a result of local uniqueness given a certain temporal parenthesis in a longer historical trajectory, others seem to be more timeless and withstanding the vicissitudes of different eras. Conversations with informants evoke different but familiar narratives.

María, a 26 year old accountant, has been working for her father Carlos, also an accountant, for a couple of years. She was born and has lived most of her life within the city limits. Her parents come from smaller towns in the province of Buenos Aires, but have spent most of their adult life in the federal capital. Today they live in a *barrio privado* in the province of Buenos Aires while María lives alone in the family's new flat in the city *barrio* of Belgrano. This affluent northern zone boasts more open space than older *barrios*, new lavish apartment buildings with doormen, catering to many younger people in transition to buying something bigger. The abundant foliage of the trees planted on different avenues gives it an altogether respiratory, open ambience. We were talking about porteños, and how she related to the category.

“Well, I'm not porteño-porteña... people who never drive, they don't go outside General Paz (the all encompassing avenue that circles-in the city of Buenos Aires, demarcating the border to the province bearing the same name), also a lot of elderly people, like where *you* lived in Recoleta (an old and traditionally fashionable and architecturally ostentatious *barrio* representing the Paris cachet more than anywhere in the city, I was unaware of this before I came to the city the first time). A lot of people didn't work, lived on inherited or old money, I guess the money was more or less spent somewhere down the road, but they still live there... ..there are so many people living in the glory of the past, you know, it's like they think they still have the money, but all they really have, or what they think is important, is their address or

their surname - that's it. Belgrano is different. A lot of younger people live here, they have money, but they don't care about histories of family wealth or surnames. Yes many people in Recoleta own their own flats, probably almost all of them, but their means are not limitless. You have seen the buildings, inside too. Maybe they are not so very nice the flats, as opulent lobbies and impeccable doormen downstairs would have you believe.”

So in what way does she admit to being porteña then, and not porteño-porteña?

“Well, I work mostly in the province, my father works in the province... I was born here, but that's it... I don't like tango... and besides, the city is very old - and sad! Microcentro, San Telmo, Congreso, La Boca, Barracas, Almagro... *barrios feos* (ugly neighbourhoods)! I need more green spaces, open places... like Belgrano, it's greener... has more trees, you know. Well, I like old things that are well maintained - nice, but so much in this city looks old, ugly, dead! I don't like old things... and you know... porteños...tango...*compadritos* and all that, it doesn't exist any longer. *You* know that the tango is for tourists, right?”

In her account about parts of the city and its inhabitants, María clearly demonstrates a predisposition for the new, the not yet come-of-age. For María, the porteño denotes that which was and does not longer exist. Furthermore, *the city that was* is not something to which she relates pleasantly. The *barrios* she mentioned are old *barrios*, and some of them are hosts to old architecture, places and events with a political history, and of course tango. Many of these places are very run-down, poorly maintained and ill-aging faces of a city that in many ways is being perceived as a “has-been”, the cause of which primarily must be ascribed to political authorities and public neglect, although you will almost certainly hear porteños claiming that "Argentineans don't know how to conserve or preserve". However, preservation and maintenance is more important than age. Tango is an old institution exclusively pertaining to Buenos Aires in general, and San Telmo in particular. María doesn't dance tango, even though she knows many lyrics by heart. She is educated in economy, and has a lot to say about the financial crisis the country finds itself in. Her disgust with the corrupt and seemingly incapable pantheon of politicians is profound. “I wish sometimes we were like a European country”, illustrates this. In fact, she once told me that she would "rather Argentina was a British colony, then the economic slave to the USA" which is how she sees her country. This reveals several things, most obviously European affinity and a sense of trust in what it represents, suspicion towards the national political establishment, and the humiliation and anger over being dominated by the superpower in the north.

There is an abundance of meaning in the statement: “so many people are living in the glory of the past...”

This comment is directed towards the people, the porteños of yore, who according to her, still believe, or choose to believe that Buenos Aires is still the financially prosperous, culturally dynamic and aesthetically immaculate place that it once was. And the people themselves, again as I choose to interpret her, are the ones who relentlessly and obliviously keep on indulging in this illusory state of grandness. Even though people with limited means drape themselves in the cloth of high life, and choose to physically situate themselves in places, either apartments for living or in restaurants, polo stands or private clubs for enjoying life just because it gives cachet, there is no doubt severe socioeconomic differences between the inhabitants of the *barrio* of Recoleta, and say La Boca and Barracas. The salient point however of this observation, is that Maria refers to a set of people who symbolise a cosmopolitanism that is no longer valid; it does no longer exist because it is founded on a communication of symbols and a perception of the city that no longer holds truth. These old porteños, the former in-crowd turned flâneurs of the old Parisian barrios of Buenos Aires represent a porteño cosmopolitanism which has been reinvented and as such leaving them exposed as maladapted anachronisms.

Many young people offer the same observations that María does. They coincide in attributing the concept of porteño the meaning of old, out of date, out of fashion. This might refer to people, values or status symbols. This discourse integrates an antagonism towards traditional and inherited wealth, as discerned in Maria's account. This is opposed to the "younger people of Belgrano", largely *profesionales* like herself having invested time, effort and means into education and situated themselves rather comfortably at management and professional level within the new service economy. We can see the representation of values in the narrative constructed to contrast the idleness and laissez-faire of older people of traditional wealth and the individual industriousness of "ordinary people" with sound trajectories arriving at a good life by merit.

The 28-year-old autodidact computer programmer and part time musician Damian, conforms to the idea of there being various ways of identifying and conceptualising the porteño.

"There are many levels, you can call yourself porteño just by being born in the city. Perhaps you know about the relationship between the provinces and the city, I think it's a long story why porteños are the way they are today. The federal government is here, and has always had some control over the provinces, a position of power. All the great decisions have been made in Buenos Aires. Economic history, story of benefits, what goes where, how is it to be distributed... foreign companies invested, and the people integrated in a way the people from Buenos Aires, and gave them power and control... this is very important in understanding the notion that if 'it's not happening here, it's not

happening in the rest of the country.’”

Damian reproduces a narrative of territoriality and power. This power comes with agency from outside, and is exerted inside, i.e. on the rest of the country. The urban-rural dichotomy of conflict is central to the understanding of porteño in this case - defining something in its contrasting relation to another. We recognise the notion of clear local demarcation and overseas cultivation and aspiration, as has been central to our idea of porteño cosmopolitanism. Interestingly, Damian proceeds focusing on social stratification. The familiar concepts of class are central to his narrative and how he constructs difference in his version of the historical antecedents for present patterns of a socially segregated urban space:

"There are two kinds of porteños. Initially, the Buenos Aires elite lived near the port, but moved out when it was plagued by the yellow fever. They moved to the outskirts of the city, Belgrano and Palermo, which at that time were fields and farmland. They left the traditional neighbourhoods to slaves or lower class people. These were barrios like San Telmo and San Christobal. People with means moved upward to the north of the city when the city grew to be big, and many live now in *barrios privados* (enclosed and guarded private housing estates outside the city, subject to later analysis) and *countries* (the predecessor to the *barrio privado*, generally with less schematic construction and higher expenses). The way things developed, it was not necessary to stay near the port. There will always be an elite, people who are descendants of these traders and investors... Then there were other kinds of immigrants, workers and such, who themselves, or their children developed skills or received education and sort of became the middle classes."

Pablo, a 20-year-old economy student at a private university, presents another familiar narrative when considering the porteño. His stance is justificatory in explaining the concept of the *vivo*, and how it perhaps relates to *chantaje*. As implied earlier, here is an informant drawing on the immigrant story in constructing the idea of porteño. It finds its essence in the aspect of a general behaviour nascent in the years of new countrymen struggling to create a viable daily existence. The city is portrayed as a hostile and unforgiving site; the *viveza* is the strategy of survival:

"I guess being quick and *vivo* is something typical porteño. You know, you always have to be on guard dealing with people, or you will risk getting cheated. If someone can take advantage in outsmarting you in some way, or if you are very naïve... then you're had. I think this quality of the people has been developed over a long time in this city. I think it has to do with the hard life many of the immigrants found themselves facing when they got here. You have to consider that being *vivo* is a kind of survival, and it was their way of making it in the face of adversity."

Two aspects should be considered more closely in the immediate continuation, both separately and in connection with each other, namely social position and ethnic physiognomy.

Transcending and precluding in narration

The class of porteño

The upper class magnate, the bourgeois proprietor, the nouveau riche entrepreneur, the upper middle class professional, the middle class employee and the worker might all very well correspond to a notion of the porteño, inasmuch as they contextually exhibit qualities that are associated with porteño practices. The *cholulo*, the *vivo*, the *chanta* or the *boludo* all refer to behaviours and orientations that find their personification in porteño narratives. The category of porteño, having established that it not only discloses territorial origin or pertinence but also a set of characteristics thought to be an inscribed testament to the former, contextually transcends the social structure and applies to representatives of most classes. In this sense, appropriating a Bourdieuan nomenclature, there would seem to exist as many types of the porteño as there are social fields. Some characterisations would be traditionally linked to certain fields, but more importantly, the multitude of these qualities would be identified within the practices and people of one and the same field, more so than one quality being associated specifically with a certain field.

However, various aspects of porteño behaviour also apply by default through imagination, and consequently they establish themselves as stereotypes. Not to regard a *taxista* (taxi driver) as *vivo* (if not solely for the manner in which he drives) would be implausible. Or an *arbolito* (small tree, person selling and exchanging currency on the street) for the business in which he deals and the informal way he goes about it. A politician is similarly throughout the social structure regarded a *chanta* by virtue of his trade. An accountant in his fifties, perhaps one of Wilson's *engominados* might well fall into the perceived category of the porteño *serio* (grave, serious). However, socially and culturally conditioned (Bourdieu, 1998), the perceptions made might render equally much information about the perceiver as of the subject under scrutiny. What a working class individual with limited acquisitive power might regard as a *cheto* (snob, dressing like a success) and a *vivo* (here: someone clever), converts to a *grasa* (tacky, vulgar) and a *chanta* (scoundrel, dishonest or illegitimate) in the optic of the upper middle class *profesional* with a long education and an unspectacular job - the person they were both observing was the nouveau riche entrepreneur.

The colour of porteño

Although many of these narratives of porteño typicality are located within particular classes (or social fields) or transcending them in totality, *porteño* nevertheless remains principally a *white* category. The local taxonomy of race and ethnicity is complex. I will give a brief outline of the connotations of terms inherent to the dominant discourse of race within the social strata to which my informants chiefly pertain. First of all, the reputation both claimed by and given to the city as *a white one*, is not at all unreasonable comparing with the demographic composition of the other metropolis of the Latin American continent. African Americans hardly constitute a group as they do in for example Brazil, Colombia, Venezuela and even Uruguay. Argentina in general for its population, and Buenos Aires in particular for its cultural and human imports, has enjoyed the reputation as the white Latin America (Germani, 1964, Rock, 1985 and Solberg, 1970). This correlates to both the ethnic composition of the population and by what influences the city was shaped, and consequently attempted given its identity. The "Paris of South America" was a befitting name for the city, as both its cultural life and inhabitants were in fact increasingly European, both in inspiration and origin respectively. Sarmiento, progressive president of the republic in the 1860's and 70's who enthusiastically encouraged white immigration, idealised Buenos Aires as a fortress of civilization against the untamed, savage hinterlands beyond the pampas, clearly with racial as well as telluric reference.⁽⁴⁸⁾

By the 1900's, what remained of the indigenous population of the country, the descendants of the ones who had not been slaughtered by the colonial power, had largely mixed with the descendants of the colonists, and formed what was called (and still today) *criollos* (creoles). Today, one will still discern the dichotomy when hearing talk about *hijos del país* and *hijos de los inmigrantes* (sons of the country and sons of the immigrants). The reader will remember the *viveza criolla* of which France wrote. However, seeing Maradona as a supreme incarnation of this, only further enhances the argument underway. Maradona is a representative for the poorer working class families. He embodies the classic narrative of the *pibe* (lad); a boy from poor background manoeuvring and finding his way in society, not by virtue of violence, but through improvisation, taking short cuts and being cheeky. Maradona of course made this narrative immortal by acting out its essence in the 1986 World Cup in Mexico, where one of his two goals in the match that saw the English beaten in the quarter final, was handball. Maradona celebrated the goal as if it were perfectly good, and duped

the referee into giving it. With the cheek that is made typical of the *pibe*, Maradona later called the incident "the hand of God" when asked whether it was handball or not. That of the poor *pibe* is not necessarily the most typical porteño narrative, even though *his cheek is*. Furthermore, and most importantly in this case, is that Maradona is *white*.

There are millions of people in Argentina today, and throughout the city of Buenos Aires of darker skin and indigenous features. Socioeconomic studies would undoubtedly find a correlation of poverty and their over-representation in this demise. To say that there are no blacks in Argentina would largely hold water, but that does not preclude the existence of the *negro* (Spanish for black). However, my average informant will profusely claim that *negro* in local parlance is a term of *social* connotation. This does not alter the fact that it is distinctly pejorative and stigmatic, and effectively used as such in discourses on class and morality. Later analysis will show that the concept of *negro* is a powerful image of behaviour and trajectories offensive and unacceptable for the individuals associated with positions higher up in the social hierarchy. Seeing as descendants of the indigenous population are grossly over represented in the marginalised and impoverished segment of the overall population, and "unable to escape" the stigma carried by complexion, the *negro*, and all the *cosa de negro* (his ways/typical of the *negro*) will inevitably be associated with faces, not only imagined practices. These faces are not those of the white Argentina or the Parisian, Milanian or New Yorkian Buenos Aires, and furthermore, they are not those of the porteños.

Recapitulating and articulating a basis

The notion of the porteño is found in a set of practices and orientations that are widely associated with life in the metropolis. Transcending the contextuality of associated actions, porteño denotes urban whiteness as oppose to the rural, the rustic, the folkloric and indigenous; in short, it opposes the elements that frequently goes into the constructions of nationalistic imageries and narratives. The cosmopolitan dimension is a conditional one, and it resurges and reinvents itself cyclically when the socio-economical and political premises have facilitated transnational cultural flows where upon appropriation and familiarisation inequality and distinction rearticulate themselves in the city. Porteño cosmopolitanism as such, might very well persist as an idea or an aspiration among porteños, however it remains in practice a project for discrete social segments granted accessibility.

Profesionales represent a social segment that by virtue of the socio-economic position in the present state of the society can indulge in the way of life that coincides with, although adapted to

new times, hegemonic ideas and images of porteño cosmopolitanism. What is of subsequent interest to this study, is to demonstrate the fundamental argument that in the process of reinvented middle class cosmopolitanism, local, class based conceptions of morality and taste, inform and generate discourses whereby distinction and difference finds loci for reconceptualisation, reassertion and communication.

3

Middle class trajectories and lifestyles - aspirations, practices and preferences

I submit this as a sociological description of some central aspects that are integral to the reproduction of social practices, the discourses of distinction these generate and the social classification informed by these. An understanding of these trajectories can provide us with a broader knowledge of the social structures from which to extrapolate the uniqueness of an event or a set of occurrences. Furthermore, it provides an insight into the social fields wherein reflection is performed and instant meaning is created by informants. Trajectories are here meant to refer to general paths taken in education and career choices, traditional family constellations, and the pastime activities of the recreational realm. Identifying these trajectories yields insight into both the planning and stylisation of life, as they represent the objective conditions wherein social discourses and classification emerge.

Conditions for social reproduction

The dichotomy of state and family, and the roles played by these two institutions, should be considered. The matter of the conditions is as much an economical question as one of social instruction. Opportunities are not an aggregate of infinite choices (Bourdieu, 1997). They are characterized by their limitations - be they of monetary or social constraints. Change and continuity in differentiated and stratified societies have to do with institutionalised premises and agents of regulations, constraints, opportunities and resistance (De Certeau, 1984). New social forms, the acceptance of these, new professions, new modes of work and the viability of these, are connected to political legislation and economic structures as well as cultural morphology reflecting the character of social interaction. Trends are introduced and popularised, and deviance turns to norm, just as some things remain marginalized, practices take on new forms and discourse-guided new sensibilities vilify or rebuke traditional conceptions (Harris, 1990). Although this interplay makes for dynamics of imponderable workings and effects, it does not imply that individual opportunities are limitless. Symbolic violence and real restraints on social forms exist in the most liberal

democracies.

We can only consider a few aspects of informants' lives, a selected few social institutions and realms like those of education, family and recreation. Moreover, we cannot explore every aspect of these realms. I will attempt to shed some light on the realities by which trajectories render themselves plausible, obvious, preferable or inevitable. Below follows a presentation of these realms, and the general features that characterise them in the case of my informants. I will continuously reflect upon the relationship between the trajectories and practical conditions; considering the role played by state and family, and the public and private, in a sphere of opportunity and constraint.

Education

Following in the steps of parents

Regarding higher education among informants, all those whose parents or father have a university degree, have also either completed university studies, or are in the process of doing so. Very often, they also emulate their parents in choosing the same career. This is invariably seen in relation to direct parental guidance. Like in the case of July, 25:

“I like accounting, I really do. I like working with numbers, even though not all of it is equally interesting or fun. Of course, sometimes it can be downright boring, but I don't think you'll find any career that only entails fun tasks. To tell you the truth, though, I don't know if I would have chosen accountancy in another time and place - another life. Personally I like history very much, and I would have loved to study that. It's a subject that always interested me very much. But, people are right, and my father too I guess, if you choose a career like that in this country... well, it's almost impossible. What will you live off? Choosing something like that will make you dependant on another - another income, another person. At least my career choice has given me security. I will probably always be able to find work in this line of business, and it pays well, so I'll be fine.”

Those whose parents (invariably father) have always made a living outside the traditional professions also tend to do so. Pablo's father used to run a company making electric appliances and equipment in the tax-alleviated zone of Ushuaia, but like many other Argentinean industries, went out of business some years ago. The family was living well in terms of property ownership, but was forced to sell one of their flats in Buenos Aires. After that, the father went into the *remisería*-business (a *remis* is a local taxi service), and opened up his own dispatch with some cars, hiring a

few drivers. Pablo, the middle of three sons still lives at home at the age of 33, and has held various jobs in sales. He most recently worked as a sales representative for an ice-cream company. After he was laid-off due to company downsizing in the face of the economic crisis, I have more or less lost contact with him, as have many of his friends with whom he usually socialised.

Alejandro started and left his university studies in accounting various times, and according his friends who did complete their studies, he will never finish. Neither of his parents took the path of higher studies. His father has always been involved in some sort of business or enterprise. For many years up until recently, the family shared ownership with an aunt of Alejandro, in a petrol station and an adjacent huge town house from the turn of the last century. After years of living comfortably, during which the petrol station supported most of Alejandro's near family, things changed. It emerged that Alejandro's aunt had been deprived of profits she was entitled to over a long period of time. Furthermore, the family had run up huge debts for tax evasion. Suddenly, the family was facing legal action on two fronts, and the outcome of the trials resulted in the loss of the petrol station and a substantial tax claim by the authorities. Alejandro is the youngest of four children. His three sisters did take higher or further education. One is an architect, as is her husband. They live in a *barrio privado* in an affluent zone outside the city. Another is a medical doctor married to a man who found employment in the family's petrol station. The third is a primary school teacher who used to stay at home with her children, but after her husband lost his work and remained unemployed, she had to return to work outside the home. Alejandro is currently residing in Majorca, following in the steps of the thousands of Argentineans who have left the country following the economic crisis. He remains in touch with friends at home per e-mail, juggling with plans of wine-import from Argentina to Spain, all the time while going back and forth from Majorca and Italy trying to sort out the right process of obtaining his Italian citizenship, enabled by the descent of his grand-father.⁽⁴⁹⁾

Acknowledging parental dependency

Facundo and Natalia married four years ago. He is 29 she is 26. He is an engineer with a Master in economics, holding a good position in the sales division of YPF, Argentina's biggest oil company which was privatised during the Menem years.⁽⁵⁰⁾ She is an English teacher, teaching at an institute and giving classes in private companies.⁽⁵¹⁾ Although they are both very keen on living and working abroad (he prefers Europe, she USA), they have recently bought a new home, a duplex (three-floors

semi-detached house) in the residential *barrio* of Villa Devoto, an investment that was facilitated by the financial support of Natalia's well-off accountant father. Facundo's family is of Italian working class background, Natalia's family is Catalan, and from the middle classes. They both have a sibling each, Facundo an elder sister, Natalia a younger brother. All of them have taken higher education, Natalia's younger brother has yet to finish, though. He is currently spending an exchange semester at a university in Texas, USA.

The studies undertaken by all four of them have been financed exclusively by their parents. They have attended private universities where tuition is secured by monthly payments. Some universities charge more than others. The one attended by Facundo, the ITBA, is known as an expensive, but academically excellent institution equally to the degree of Torcuato DiTella where Natalia's younger brother attends his classes in economics. The catholic university where Natalia went has a reputation of being *cheto* (smart, chic, upscale). As a friend of hers, who has not attended this university, told me: "All the kids from the *barrios privados* and so on, they go there. It's *concheto*, it gives a lot of status". Most of the young people I know with university education have their degrees from private universities.

It is not hard to imagine that paying for many years of university studies for one's children is taking its toll on families, and as such it might be considered a significant sacrifice. Some youths might not see it that way, others do. Facundo reflects on the role of his father, a labourer in his fifties, and the history of his family:

"My father did start university studies you know, he was interested in having a career. But he was married you see, and my mother was studying as well. She, as you know, finished to become a paediatrician. Then they had my sister, and well, and the question of support became a serious issue. Well... my father left his studies. He worked as a taxi driver and took different jobs, working in construction or painting houses, to put my mother through university and support the family. I recognise deeply what he did back then. He has always been ...well, strict, but very fair with us - his children. Of course I thank him for where I am today."

Both parents of Natalia are educated as accountants. The mother, however, has never worked outside the home. Like many women belonging to the generation that today are in their early fifties, she decided to stay at home raising the children rather than practicing what she had been studying, as the family was always well provided for by Natalia's father. A few years ago, Natalia's parents got divorced. Her mother has received a substantial settlement from the father, as Argentinean

legislation is protective of housewives in the event of divorce. Even though the father has no longer any legal responsibility to provide financially for his children, he still plays a very instrumental part in their lives in that respect, as house purchases, travels, exchange studies and university tuition all bear proof of.

The meaning of schools and schooling

Education is ascribed very high value in this social world and regarded as paramount and instrumental for a good life. Among *profesionales*, this is the springboard to a sphere of self-improvement, and to socially arrive; a perennial preoccupation within the *porteño* middle classes (Svampa, 2001). This should be qualified, though. Half a century ago, the only differentiation of the school system was that between private catholic schools and public schools (Burdick, 1996). During the last forty years, there has been a substantial privatisation of the educational system, one not related to clerical teaching or administration. Many of these institutions, from primary schools to universities, discriminate on the basis of acquisitive power, thus granting the alumni and their families a mark of distinction. The public conceptions that arose were those of the private schools' academic and social superiority. Stiff tuition fees, seductively lavish images of campus and buildings are contributing in constructing an image of inaccessibility, an image that upon access converts to cultivated exclusivity (Bourdieu, 1984). Furthermore, private companies sponsor the private universities and largely recruit their employees from these institutions. What cannot be overlooked, and is invariably confirmed by informants, is that private schools, at any level, and bilingual colleges even more so, are conducive to high social prestige. Studies at private universities give status in the prestige associated with the establishment. What does it mean then, to attend the public University of Buenos Aires (UBA)? María, 26, who studied accounting at the private University of Belgrano, but took a Master course at UBA, suggests:

“Some universities are known for, or have prestige associated with certain fields, for example ITBA for engineer studies, DiTella for economics and so on. Universidad Catolica de Argentina for example, doesn't have the same academic prestige as some of the others, but still, it's where a lot of the upper middle class kids go. All the girls from “good families” you know, “good girls”, they go there. It's *cheto*. They talk like this... in a special way... all these things typical of that style; phrases, gestures, fashion.... And also, it has a lot of *categoría* for the fact that it is very nice, I mean, it's a very nice place, nice campus... beautiful site. The new campus is in Puerto Madero, so obviously this location also makes it as *cheto* as it gets. You have seen the state of the UBA. It's a disaster. Completely run down,

vandalised many places, things out of order and posters and stuff put up everywhere. Paint coming off... and have you ever tried searching for a book in the library of the UBA? You have to manually look for a title in old cards! In Belgrano I can just look it up on the computerised register, easy and effectively. Clearly, studying at the UBA is associated with not having the means to study elsewhere. But mind you, there are a lot of people studying at the UBA from families with money. They don't want to pay tuition. That's the reason why they say that they should at least pay some fee every semester, seeing as they do have some money to spend. What they are doing is really occupying places for people who are more *humilde*, who will never have access to private institutions. But many of the people who choose to study at private universities do it because of the ... study programs. I mean, studying at UBA is such a slow process. You finish earlier at the private ones, they have more intense, but more importantly, more structured programs. There is never the amount of strikes as is the case at the UBA. Just about anything can happen there, you know. People with the means, they go to some private university, they aim at getting their degree, and start taking the steps towards that coveted executive position in the corporate world. That's like the dream you know. For a lot of people, that's what it's all about."

For some, becoming *profesional* is strictly a matter of utilitarian calculations. Horacio, father of July, an accountant in his mid-fifties, took courses in various fields. He admits pursuing accounting because he had to make a living and provide for his family. He is not particularly fond of what he does; there are other things he "would have liked to have done instead." Nevertheless, he advised his daughter to study accounting, and so she did. Interests and educational choices do not always coincide. Horacio's brother-in-law, Diego, is an engineer but by choice never worked as one. He has devoted himself to various kinds of sales and inventing gadgets. Edgardo, a friend of Horacio's daughter is also an engineer by title but not by profession. The 30-something bachelor works as a golf instructor, catering to practitioners of this sport that has exploded among porteños during the last 10 years. He is hoping to be offered a contract as a professional player; in the meantime he is busy giving lessons to clients of most ages, from 10 to 60.

What these individuals do have in common, is their university education and a diploma to testify to their knowledge and expertise. They have in other words security. Having professional spouses or other means of income allow them to dabble with other things. In the case of Edgardo, his alternative trade is obviously one facilitated by the cultural changes brought about by the economic changes. Diego's financial worries are alleviated by his wife's income. Horacio on the other hand is forced to ply the trade he learnt in order to fulfil his role as provider.

That some universities confer on their alumni a higher status or more prestige is a phenomenon neither new nor specific to Argentina. Apart from the status conducive to a higher degree diploma and becoming *profesional*, there is additional status to be extracted from the prestige carried by the

institution where ones studies are undertaken.⁽⁵²⁾ There are few or no programs offering students *viable* grants or loans facilitating in practice an opportunity for everyone to achieve a higher education. Most private universities offer grants, but the rest of the tuition would be too expensive for many. Also, in order to receive full grants, one has to document the complete inability on the part of the family to offer financial support. No doubt, some obtain these grants, but they are not sufficient to undertake studies at private institutions. Students attending the UBA do not pay tuition nor semester fees, but they are very much dependent on being provided for by family or spouses, or keeping a job besides studies. The latter is accommodated as most lectures in the universities are given in the evenings. The reason for this is that most lecturers are associated with the university ad honorem in that they hold other jobs during the day. The pay received for giving lectures reflects the voluntary character of the deed in that it is merely symbolic in relation to professional salaries. Even though students are able to work beside studies, and many undoubtedly do, it is my experience that most of my informants regard this as “a way out”, a clear indication that parents are not able to provide for them to attend good institutions without worrying about costs.

The prestige of the private institutions which is a source of status for its students and their families, is founded in how these establishments are perceived by reputation and imagination. The tuition they charge is economically demanding on families of the student. This is common knowledge, though, an aspect that makes it a sound investment in the symbolic economy. The buildings, facilities and campus sites are attractive, clean, well maintained and fully functional, all elements that legitimise the costs. The condition of the public university such as the UBA is in stark contrast to that of most private ones. The UBA is of course completely dependent on public funding, a responsibility undertaken by the state with mixed commitment and result.

Educational matters illustrate what might be observed as a clear development in Argentina over the last decade and gaining momentum during the last few years, namely the separation of society and social life into a public and a private sphere. With this tendency the social mobility within the middle classes has been one resulting in increased polarisation (Guano, 2002). Where many have fallen from grace, others are sitting pretty compared to what they used to (Svampa, 2001). It is common knowledge in Argentina that you are in for a rough ride if made dependent of the state. No institution like the public administration, ranging from political halls of power to the most menial municipal office, is subject to more suspicion and loathing from most porteños, and in particular *profesionales*. By this mark, what can be discerned as status fulfilment is *the ability by oneself or*

one's family to escape the dependency of the state; to make oneself independent - not from ones family but from that which is public.

Real and symbolic dividends

There are many cases suggesting the utilitarian character of educational choices. This elicits the aspect of calculation; of choices and decisions, and what this calculation implies; certainly the lifestyle made accessible is a concern. Even though some *profesionales* are not particularly happy or content with their work, maybe they are even disillusioned with the more mundane tasks of their everyday occupation, they do enjoy the status associated with being a *profesional*. Like any other, this status is contingent upon recognition. There is recognition within one's group, fellow *profesionales* who have firsthand knowledge of what the achievement implies and entails (Bourdieu, 1984), and recognition from outsiders in what is rendered observable in how *profesionales* are able to stylise their lives (Weber, 1947) - regarding spacious, often mansion-like houses in the *barrio privados*, expensive and contemporary-style furnished flats in fashionable buildings in the city; dressing in designer labels actually converting gazing into purchasing; driving foreign made SUV's (Sport Utility Vehicles) in the middle of the city and not always but at least having the opportunity to go out at night in the chicest zones where the latest of innovative world cuisine, cocktails, fashion and jargon is readily displayed, consumed and talked (Puerto Madero, Las Cañitas or Palermo Hollywood).

Moreover, one cannot neglect the power conducive to the titles a degree provides. Dr., or Doctor does almost invariably not refer to a person holding a doctor's degree in an academic field or even a physician. Most often it will refer to a lawyer or an accountant, and most often, they will refer to themselves as such. Architects and engineers also often make use of their professional title in ordinary social situations, and in work situations where it is not directly relevant; for example an architect employed in selling furniture might present herself as such, stressing who and what she really is. Some *profesionales* will expect this title to figure in any kind of communication, some might regard it as silly. It is however common that mail or communications related to business will make use of the title in addressing the *profesional*. It cannot be ignored that this is a practice of inclusion and exclusion, communicating one's rightful place in a system of recognition to which more and more subscribe.

Family matters

Living and remaining in close contact

The nuclear family must be regarded as a strong social unit among the informants. This, as opposed to wider kin and circles of friends, is the principle locus for social exchange; seeking guidance as well as moral and financial support. Wider kin usually only get together on special occasions such as birthday celebrations and weddings, that is, if they have any contact at all. Very few of my informants have regular contact with cousins, even though they live within the boundaries of the same city. Relations between wider kin is as such not cultivated.⁽⁵³⁾ There is, however, not given much leeway in the definition of this constellation. The nuclear family refers invariably to the matrimony between a man and woman, and their children.⁽⁵⁴⁾

Most young live with their parents during the years of university studies (except for people studying far from home who usually rent a place with same-sex fellow students). They are financially dependent on their parents, but they do not entertain the idea of getting a part-time job. Most live with their parents until they marry. Marriage normally ensues moving into a new flat provided for the couple by the combined efforts of the families in question. Young couples rarely have any expenses in connection with the wedding as it is a financial responsibility expected to be undertaken by parents. It is common for the couple to move into a small flat, often in a *barrio* familiar and known to one of the two. After some years of working and saving, more spacious housing is normally acquired. Some move into townhouses, as in the case of the still childless couple of Facundo and Natalia, whereas many move out of the city. The latter is seen in the increasing tendency of matrimonies with small children buying houses in the *barrio privados* and *countries* in the Buenos Aires suburbia and provincial areas.

Many young couples choose to keep on living in the city, though, remaining conveniently near the work place. Distances are long on the Pampas, and even though public communication and road systems are good, for two young *profesionales* to have their work an hour away from their home, and so their children, is simply not desirable. A large number of young women of the *barrio privados* are housewives. Though many have completed studies they have opted to stay at home with their children, emulating the generation of their mothers. Some, schooled or skilled in other fields, offer their services within the gated neighbourhood, something that amounts to a wide range of offers in everything from pottery classes, gardening, yoga, meditation, body care, lectures etc

(Svampa, 2001).

It is quite common for young professional women to take a leave of absence from work during the first years in the life of the child. After a period of time, there are the services of kinder gardens for those who can afford it, but very often grandmothers help with the child care during parents' working hours. There is a tendency that the maternal grandparent undertakes this task, however, this is also a question of physical proximity between the generations. As established, settling down in your own *barrio* facilitates this.

Young married couples or single *profesionales* living on their own often make use of the weekends to see their parents. Facundo and Natalia frequently go to see his parents on Sundays. Here they will often meet with his sister and brother-in-law. This ritual is centred on the Sunday lunch, prepared by his mother - a feast of Italian cuisine reflecting the traditions and origins of the family. María is another young *profesional* who leaves la city porteña every Sunday. She often spends Saturday evenings out with friends, and retreats the following day to the home of her parents in the *barrio privado*, a 40 minutes drive outside the capital. Here she enjoys lunch prepared by her mother or an *asado* prepared by her father.⁽⁵⁵⁾ She spends Sundays catching up with her parents, going for walks, surfing on the Internet and watching television. If boredom sets in, she drives off "just to have a look" at the nearby shopping mall, constructed adjacent to a corralled entertainment park of restaurants, bars and cinemas catering exclusively to the residents of the numerous *barrio privados* and *countries* in the area.

It is my uniform experience that the *profesional* segment of the middle classes have notably few children; very often one, sometimes two, rarely three. This stands in contrast to what is presented in portraits of working class or poor families in special reports either in printed media or on television, where numbers between 3 and 6, even 10 are common.⁽⁵⁶⁾ Also, it is my experience that families representing upper or upper middle class have more children than what I have discerned to be the trend among my informants. Young men and women from small nuclear families I know emphasise the necessity for family planning, i.e. few children. Individual longings, inhibitions or desires aside, there are undoubtedly economic factors at play here, as illustrated in the *profesionales* discourse emphasising the correspondence between poverty and high child ratios. When addressing the issue of low birth rates among the *profesionales*, the economic issue has invariably been quoted as more important than the medical danger of many childbirths at older age.

Negotiating independence and responsibility

To say that young unmarried people from the *clase media profesional* live very much in accordance with parents' rules and restrictions is not to say that they do not know a life outside the home. Some parents are more lenient with their teenage kids than others, in permitting them to go places, staying out, participating in activities etc. Parents do make themselves present, though, in various ways, such as organizing the driving of their daughters to the *boliche* (here: disco) on Saturday nights, and picking them up at an arranged time. Young boys on the other hand often make their way to the same place by themselves, going by bus with their group of friends.

The general opinion among my informants is that there are differences in the upbringing of boys and girls. Boys are allowed to be more explorative outside the domestic realm, prompting them to develop a sense of autonomy and independency. It is correspondingly quite common that bachelors live alone in their flats in the city (usually bought by their parents), while unmarried young women (for example their sisters or girlfriends) remain living with their parents, often for many years after they have finished their studies. There are cases of the contrary, but very often these are practical issues where the arrangements depend on where parents live, where the children find work, or what kind of properties they have at their disposal. María for example lives alone in her family's flat in the area of Belgrano, while her parents live in a *barrio privado* outside the city. Alejandro lived, in the *barrio* of Boedo, in the old townhouse connected to the petrol station of which his family had ownership. His parents lived in a *country* outside the city. Natalia's younger brother lived with his mother in the *barrio* of Villa del Parque, and stayed with his father at the weekends. Now, he is in Texas, but will return to the house of the mother when he gets back. Natalia and Facundo bought a house in Villa Devoto, a *barrio* bordering on Villa del Parque. This is a source of comfort to Natalia as she is very close to her mother and can remain within close range to her. Most of the hitherto unmentioned informants between 23 and 30 still live under the roof of their parents.

As for the division of tasks within the home, there are various but dominant patterns to be discerned. One general theme, is a husband's or a child's non-participation in household chores. Most families within this social terrain make use of the services of a maid. Some big flats and many houses have service quarters built in, i.e. a private bedroom with bathroom facilities for the maid. Most maids however live outside the residence of their employers, and so arrive at work early in the morning, often not finishing until late afternoon or evening. The work most often includes cleaning the house and laundry. Sometimes looking after the small children, walking the dog and running

small errands also occurs. The running of the household is generally a woman's domain, be it decorating, daily organizing, cooking, preparing shopping lists etc. As noted and worth remembering is the *Castellano* term for housewife, *ama de casa*, literally meaning 'owner of the house.'

In speculating about the close integration and the character of the nuclear family in the porteño professional middle class, it should be useful to consider the mosaic of social ascent, the morality of self-improvement and the role of the state. Granted that we are dealing with general patterns, there can hardly be any doubt that the disintegration/morphology of constellations, and consequent fluidity and reinvention of the concept of family, is at its most advanced in Scandinavian nation-states (Wolfe, 1989). There is an abundance of explicatory models for this kind of social development, most of which need not detain us here. Suffice to say that Argentina distinguishes itself in many ways from these liberal democracies, and the task of analytically comparing the historico-sociological trajectories will not be undertaken.

There are a few aspects of the relationship between parents and children in the *clase media profesional* we can pay closer attention to, however. Children live at home with their parents until reaching a higher age than what is usual in, for example, Norway. We might find some answers to these differences in the fact that young people in Norway make themselves economically independent at an early age, either through paid labour, or state funded studies, which are often deemed unacceptable options among my informants.⁽⁵⁷⁾ I am not suggesting that all children of *profesionales* take higher education, however if they do, they expect it to be financed by their parents in full, or partly subsidised with grants. It is fair to assume that student loans, if they existed, would represent an accumulation of unnecessary debts.

Young people of the *clase media profesional* are brought up in a class society, well familiar with the fact that social security and a comfortable life, like that achieved by their parents, are arrived at through personal endeavour; time, money and effort invested into meticulous and prudent studies.⁽⁵⁸⁾ They are well versed in the discourses of duties and rights, generated by a class morality on intergenerational responsibilities and expectancies. Among my informants, central to this understanding is provision and education in return for abiding by the rules - an arrangement most young people seem at ease with.⁽⁵⁹⁾ In countries where the state has largely relieved parents of responsibilities such as providing for university tuition by making university studies virtually free of

cost, the economical factor of inter-generational dependency does not figure to the same extent.

Putting one's children through university, after having put them through private elementary schools, high schools, colleges etc, in addition to providing for them adequately of life's necessities, is a burden that corresponds relationally to how many one actually has to provide for. As implied, the question of child ratio is important to *profesionales*, and they contrast their choices with the indigent and poor, emphasising what they regard the causal relationship between child ratio and socioeconomic position.

Profesionales are wage earners, and most of them make enough to employ a maid. There is an abundance of service in Argentina - from delivery boys, doormen, petrol station attendants, dog walkers, and maids - most of them forming part of an informal economy that perpetuates itself in the serviced lifestyle facilitated by the enormous income gap between groups such as professionals and labourers. This stands of course in stark contrast to a country such as Norway where economic equality has brought about a DIY society. Be that as it may, *comerciantes*, workers and other social groups also keep maids, and many regard the services they provide as one of the most basic ones, suggesting the customary aspect of this relationship rather than it being a luxury allowed for after careful budgeting.

After hours - things to do in one's spare time

Scarce and cherished

Young *profesionales* are busy people. Working hours are generally long, often 10 hours per day, and since office hours often do not start until 9 in the morning, and with a long lunch in the afternoon, there are not many hours left once you return home in the evening. Also, many *profesionales* attend courses at universities in the evening. Many *licenciados* (degree after 5 years of studies) have started working after they received their degree, but a large percentage of them enrol in Master courses - either as further specialization or in a different field altogether.

Understandably, leisure time is cherished among my informants as a well deserved but something of a scarce good. It comes around once a week and it starts late Friday afternoon. This time is put to use in different ways, but there are general themes. The family visit is one of them. Furthermore, shopping is generally done during the weekend. This includes the weekly *compras*, shopping for groceries and necessities. Every weekend in the *hipermercados*, one will see long lines

at the checkouts formed by carts filled to the rim and beyond with every conceivable item. Inside the city, most of them have it delivered to their door free of charge, a couple of hours later.

Café society

Spending whole afternoons that turn into evenings in a shopping mall or walking up and down shopping avenues in the city, gazing at the window displays of the numerous shops and boutiques, inspecting more or less tempting *ofertas* (special offers, discounts) is also a widely practiced pastime come weekend. Such a gazing spree which may result in one or two purchases, is frequently rounded off by either a snack in the *patio de comida* (food section of the mall), or if in the city, the most cherished porteño-pastime of all; sitting down for a coffee in a *confitería* (restaurant/bar/café), letting the conversation take its time, digesting impressions, and more or less discretely observing and discussing passers-by.

Certainly a popularised trait about the porteño experience and almost mythical in existence, the omnipresence of the *confitería*, and its relationship with the city's inhabitants, is very much part of the observable porteño lifestyle, of which *profesionales* are no exception. In the more affluent *barrios*, one seldom has to walk more than a couple of blocks for there to materialize a *confitería*. They are however of different epochs, they are of various design and ambience, and they cater to different segments of people, most often differentiated by age. The menus however do not vary notably, nor do porteño habits in what they order; with the clientele of these establishments come a well-deserved reputation for a liking of coffee drinks accompanied by sweet pastry or lavish cakes.

The *confitería* is a location for a variety of social situations. During working days, it is frequently used by *profesionales* to meet with business associates, colleagues or even friends; it is where lunch is had, where an after work refreshment might be enjoyed, or the site for socializing with study mates before or after class. During the weekend, families and friends often get together, filling many of the *confiterías* both inside and outside on the pavements, talking away the hours, indulging in sweet temptations, declining offers from passing street vendors/beggars selling just about anything.

Cultural entertainment is a pastime also predominantly pertaining to the weekend. Going to museums, gallery exhibitions, book fairs, concerts, the theatre or even the movies is something that also is generally done over the course of the weekend. Of all the above-mentioned attractions and diversions however, taking in a movie is by far the most indulged in by my informants. From what I have recorded, the former activities are done with a frequency of once or twice a year. As such,

profesionales are not heavily represented among what we might refer to as cultural consumers, and this legitimate culture, does not figure notably in their conversations, as do for example travels.

As in most modern societies, working out or practicing sports is also a leisure time activity for many porteños. Many *profesionales* do find time for this after work; working out in a gym, going swimming, playing tennis, golf or even football. Those who live in *barrio privados* or *countries* have exclusive access to the facilities there. In the city, a membership to one of the many private clubs is the corresponding way to grant oneself exclusive access to facilities. Due to a busy work schedule, many *profesionales* set aside time for exercise during the weekend, and much of it takes place on the premises of a club's gated tennis courts or football pitches, or out on the golf course.

Spouse time, dating and the management of respectability

For married couples, though, leisure time is spouse time. Many of the diurnal activities associated with the weekend are shared, whether it entails shopping, going for coffee, walking the dog etc. Evenings do offer a chance to socialize with friends, though, and it is frequently taken, as it becomes more and more difficult to cultivate contact with friends due to long working hours and marital commitments. Eating out is both popular with and quite accessible to *profesionales*. Saturday nights are often spent in the company of friends, married couples get the chance to meet over dinner or a few drinks, singles have a chance to catch up with their married friends or enjoy some hours in the company of other friends still not married.

The porteño dating game is also invariably played during weekends. Busy lives notwithstanding, young *profesionales* are no strangers to romantic rendezvous anymore than other people. Venues or places where to meet a prospective spouse or the temporary recipient of one's affection are varied. As such, young porteños do not distinguish themselves from opposite numbers in other western societies, in that movies, a few drinks at a pub, a dinner or dancing are usual activities associated with this domain. What is an idiosyncrasy though, compared to many western societies, is the phenomenon of the *albergues transitorios*. These establishments of transitory lodging are designed and used specifically for amorous encounters or quick sex, whichever way one sees it. They are located in most *barrios* inside the city and along highways in the provinces. There will often be a higher concentration of them in urban zones associated with nightlife. They vary in standard and prices. Customers pay everything from 20 to 250 pesos per hour (currently 7 to 80 dollars).⁽⁶⁰⁾ Even though there no statistics available, it is estimated that maybe half of all the activity of the *albergues*

transitorios are extra marital affairs or solicitation of the services of sex workers.

Not in the case of infidelity, although *profesionales* are no strangers to this practice, but for young couples still living under the roof of their parents, this practice is widely accepted and common. Many regularly head for these places to round off the (most notably Saturday) evening. Afterwards they will return back to the homes of their parents. Going out with singles and couples, there is no mystery or shame surrounding this well known practice. They all know this custom, and friends are quite tuned to saying their somewhat hurried goodbyes to a couple, upon the collective understanding that “it’s that time again”.

Recreational loci as pastures of privilege

There are especially two aspects about the recreational lives of *profesionales* to which I will draw attention. *Professional* recreation is frequently linked to things that cost money. There are several cases among the group of informants that individuals tend to retreat temporarily or altogether, and as such lose social contact, when going through economically precarious times, as was the case with Pablo. Birthday invitations, dinner plans and other get-togethers will be declined, always coinciding with a loss of job or other pecuniary predicaments. There is nothing mysterious about this. But it does say something about the typicality of leisure activities and the physical location of these. Invariably it happens away from public places. The paradox here is that porteños rightly claim that they love going out and staying outside the flat. But where to go and where not to go? Parks and plazas are spaces traditionally associated with public use and non-discriminated access in most cities around the world. They might or might not be sites for ongoing social interaction, but they are invariably conceived of as shared, and as such, going to the park is a shared experience among its users.

Porteño discourse on public space and the politics of display

Parks are supposedly locations that do not discriminate socially. Not so in Buenos Aires, and many parts of Latin America (Low, 1999). My informants rarely or never make use of the public spaces like plazas or parks. The 21st of September, the “First Day of Spring”, thousands of people take to the parks and stay there until late in the evenings, playing, singing, performing, eating, drinking and spending time with friends and families. I had spent the entire day in the park witnessing this multitude of social life and people crammed together obviously enjoying themselves. In the evening

I was picked up by Maria and her mother who also had spent the day in the city, and had seen the same thing. They were talking about the life in the parks as we were driving out of the city heading for the secluded life of the *barrio privado*. I heard them talking about what they had observed during the day, and it was obvious that these were neither practices nor people with which or whom they identified. I asked them why they themselves never took to the parks.

“Look, it’s not like in many other countries, in Europe for example, where everybody goes to the park, or they do whenever they can. Have you seen the state of the parks here, and have you seen who goes there? There is so much *negrada* in the parks, especially at weekends. Hordes of families bringing with them everything; games, blankets, food, the works... The park life in the weekends is a *grasada* (tackiness, vulgarity), people sitting there *chusmeando* (gossiping) and drinking *mate* (61) all the time. Ah yes, this custom of bringing the flasks with them everywhere... what’s the point of that? Look, a lot of people drink *mate* in their own homes, like my grandmother, but it’s different you know. You don’t have to consume it everywhere you go. And also, people with bare chests, running around playing all sorts of games. *Una grasada*... And a lot of people use parks as they were garbage dumps... have you seen what they look like after they have been there? I tell you, it’s *una cosa de negro*... beer bottles thrown everywhere, littering all over the place. Why is it so difficult for people to clean up after themselves? What does it cost them to put their waste in the dustbins that are around? It’s disgraceful. No... They can keep the parks for me; I’m not going there. Besides you know, the parks are more and more a place for people who don’t have anywhere else to go. A lot of people have cabins and houses outside the city where they can stay at weekends... they don’t have to stay in the city. Who would stay in these parks if they had access to nice green spaces that are well maintained and where you don’ have all this *negrada*? Honestly, would you?”

This statement conforms to the observations made by numerous scholars writing about spatial politics in Latin America, that the strata of the middle classes in ascent is retreating from public space and distancing themselves from practices associated with these spaces and with the people still using them (see Caldeira, 1999; Low, 1999; Svampa, 2001 and Guano. 2002). Drawing on categories such as *negro* and *grasa* in accentuating the negative aspects of these places and the corresponding practices, the informant draws up a contrasted image of an alternative lifestyle. There is preference, moral judgment and status communicated between the lines. Parks and park life is presented as under siege. In illustrating the offensive aspects of the invaders, attention is drawn to sheer numbers reflecting the *negro* reproduction; inferior practices such as gossiping, reflecting idleness and simple-mindedness; taste seen in comportment and consumption, reflected in the vulgarity of bared torsos and the constant drinking of the *mate*, all summed up in the explicatory matrix of socioeconomic position. Class is implied and suggested in the denouncing of the vulgarity

represented in displaying comportment and practicing activities ideally confined to the private sphere of the home. With the lambasting of the ones left behind in the public spaces, there is an identification with the ones heading out of the city every weekend. However, the account stops short of elaborating on the shared identity of the retreaters. They form a status group in that they have access to the highly stylised and constructed recreational pastures beyond the city limits, but located in this context, this is as far as it goes.

Private clubs and *barrio privados* and *countries* are obviously off limits for non-members. Shopping malls, restaurants, *confiterías*, bars etc, are supposedly not. What many porteños do find in these locations however, albeit not thought of, is a sanctuary from the *negrada*, which by many is quoted as both a depressing feature of the visual city experience and a source of insecurity (fear of being mugged). I was reading some passages about gentrification and retreat from public space in Buenos Aires in an article (Guano, 2002), and an informant asked me what I was reading. I made a reference to the absence of poor in the shopping malls, and got the following reply.

“Your right, you know. I never thought about it, but there never are poor people in the *shoppings*. I have never thought about it that way, but of course. Yes, take Calle Florida for example, always people begging, asking for change. Mothers sitting with two or three kids in their laps outside the Ralph Lauren windows of *Gallería Pacifico*. You know, how can anybody feel right in shopping and shopping, walking down the streets with a bundle of bags, when you see the misery around you. It’s not right, you know, but what can you do? Of course, in the shoppings they would never let them in. The guards would throw them out. But I have to admit I never really thought about it. What more does the article say...?”

It would be crude to suggest that professional porteños seek out the malls to do their shopping just to ease their conscience. What we can suggest, however, is that the troublesome reminder of distinction in its extreme and socially most primal form is not allowed to make an otherwise haunting visitation.

Not all establishments cater to the same social groups. Having a cup of coffee at the local *confitería* is a pastime still very much available to most porteños, enjoying a complete night out in Puerto Madero or Las Cañitas, however, is not within the reach of everyone. These areas crammed with chic new restaurants with alternative and innovative menus mixing Cordon Bleu and the gauchesque *parilla* (barbecue part of the menu), boasting names originating from most corners of the world, play scene to numerous *profesionales* out on that special romantic date or a dinner with

friends. In being generally pricey they are inaccessible to most people in the country, and even to a great number of porteños. Undoubtedly, for many people these arenas are considered *cheto* by virtue of whom they are catering to; namely people who are *cheto*. The dialectic at work is that the places are defined by its frequenters, and vice versa. Among the frequenters is a fair share of *profesionales*, however, seeing and being seen week in and out in these promised lands are out of the reach of most of them.

The preceding paragraphs have been meant to briefly frame some general themes that are characteristic of the lives and lifestyles of informants and other *profesionales* alike. I have briefly outlined aspects that hold some typicality for my informants regarding educational paths, family constellation and recreation. I also intended to present cases that are anomalous to the general pattern of the data, as with Pablo and Alejandro, friends of those informants who themselves are young *profesionales*. By means of this frame I want to give the reader a basic insight from which to more clearly grasp the informants' 'take on it all', i.e. how they themselves evaluate, judge, and understand the choices made, the lives lead and the preferences held by the people to whom they relate and with whom they form relationships. As the recent passages have been intended primarily descriptive, I will later consider the reflections of those whose lives have been temporarily reduced to that description.

4

Taste - the social meaning of a preference

For our purposes, I will at the outset define taste as a preference communicated through the objects and practices with which we style our existence.⁽⁶²⁾ I contend that a basis for this communication is that the preference objectified (demonstrated in the purchase of an object or the practice of a certain pastime) carries some meaning precisely in its ability to connote or yield an image of a certain lifestyle. Taste is then reflected and communicated through a range of symbols, and meaning is attributed to these symbols by virtue of how they are perceived. As these symbols - objects or practices - are associated with a social segment or group (their lifestyle), they carry social meaning by classifying a preference. Only in this manner can taste, in the case of objects and practices, be attributed social meaning, and subsequently perform the role of a mark of distinction or a stigma. Lifestyle, in terms of objects and practices, is the visualisation, or unarticulated communication of an identity. But whereas practices and objects can suggest or bear witness to a certain lifestyle by means of the associations they evoke in the beholder, they can contrastively undermine the element of status, or recognition of the identity, if perceived as illegitimate. This is a matter of evaluation, of how the management, appreciation and possession of these objects, or practicing of customs and pastimes, are judged appropriate, coherent and genuine. At the core of this evaluation lie the classificatory schemas of judgement to which we can relate the logic of symbolic capital. It is the intention of *this* chapter to investigate the process of attributing a preference social meaning (or providing it a social explanation), set in a context of the relationship between cultural and aesthetic imports and local hegemonic categories denoting taste. I endeavour to elicit how *hierarchical structures reflected or echoed in classificatory systems have a bearing on the social meaning attributed to new trends and forms*. This stands in contrast to a “globalist view” of the servile population passively, uncritically and most importantly, homogeneously, appropriating all things new by virtue of their novelty.

Revising the concept of taste and the meaning of cultural goods

In the service of distinction

There is nothing new in the admission that taste differentiates. Bourdieu plays deliberately on the ambiguity of the word *distinction*, in that it suggests both differences and the distinguished; connoting the sublime or sophisticated (Prieur, 1995). By treating taste as a social phenomena and linking it to the concept of lifestyle, we are dealing with preferences shared in the patterns of similar stylisation of life. If one were to argue that preferences could be secluded to individual enjoyment in a private sphere, we only have to remember that the objects preferred must necessarily find their origin in, and be chosen from a market, where we initially express our preference (Douglas and Isherwood, 1979). Taste is reflected in private preference made public through markers, or symbols. If these markers are frequently observed and manifested throughout a society, we might be witnessing modes of a dominant taste - a class taste or a group taste. When this taste is associated with a social segment symbolising a shared preference which distinguishes it from other segments and groups, it is endowed with social meaning, and furthermore, distinction. Objectively, taste is observed in exercising a preference; a series of choices made that, not in sum, but in relation to one another, structure lifestyles.

The ways of perceiving taste within a differentiated and stratified society, stands in direct relation to a variety of classifications and a hierarchy of lifestyles. Of course, Bourdieu suggests that both objectively observed preference and subjective perception of taste, "the socially conditioned faculty of principle and division", is a matter of social necessity; socially conditioned by and conditioning the habitus. It is, according to Bourdieu, inevitable to develop this shared perception and preference, as it is the "necessary manifestation of proximity in the social space", a proximity that is conceptualised by the similarities in composite capital. He explicates on the basis of vast statistical material the conditions for, the manifestations of, and the classification of various class-tastes. He works on various methodological levels, utilising the concept of the habitus theoretically in objectively classifying taste, and letting the same concept serve as the means by which, and how, people themselves classify others, and the taste of others;

"Taste classifies and it classifies the classifier. Social subjects, classified by their classifications, distinguish themselves by the distinctions they make, between the beautiful and the ugly, the distinguished and the vulgar, in which their positions in the objective classifications is expressed or betrayed. And statistical analysis does indeed show that

oppositions similar in structure to those found in cultural practices also appear in eating habits. The antithesis between quantity and quality, substance and form, correspond to the opposition - linked to different distances from necessity - between the taste of necessity, which favours the most filling and economical foods, and the taste of liberty - or luxury - which shifts the emphasis to the manner (of presenting, serving, eating, etc.) and tends to use stylised forms to deny function" (Bourdieu 1984:6)

Here Bourdieu addresses the notion of commensurability of taste in elements as different as daily foodstuffs and artwork, implying a homology of taste we have referred to as the relation between various objects and practices; a set of relations that makes possible the discerning of a lifestyle. The commodities and practices are, by virtue of being associated with certain lifestyles, symbols, and in the hierarchy of lifestyles, they are assigned status; clearly recognised and conceived of as that of a certain group of people.

Weber's introduction of the concept of status groups, and the focus on both shared and diverging social interests and powers by groups characteristic of a new diversified, professionalised and bureaucratised society, laid the ground for class analysis of different kinds of hegemonies of power and social relations (Coser, 1977). Characteristic for the status group is that it is subject to recognition from outside. *Profesionales* are subject to this recognition in their society, however, they also exert a recognition from within. Instrumental to this recognition are stereotypical ideas and expectations about what is imagined as one's own group, e.g., a certain lifestyle perceived to be informed or inspired by a certain (and shared) sense of taste. As such, not only does there exist a statistically observable distinction between this status group and other social segments, there also exists a premise for an *expected* distinction. It is expected (among themselves) that *profesionales* will have a distaste for - distinguish themselves from - that which is perceived as the taste and preference of others. With reference to taste as distaste, Bourdieu observes:

Tastes (i.e., manifested preferences) are the practical affirmation of an inevitable difference. It is no accident that, when they have to be justified, they are asserted purely negatively, by the refusals of other tastes. In matters of taste, more than anywhere else, all determination is negation, and tastes are perhaps first and foremost distastes, disgust provoked by horror or visceral intolerance of the tastes of others... ..because each taste feels itself to be natural - and so it almost is, being a habitus - which amounts to rejecting others as unnatural and therefore vicious. (Bourdieu, 1984:56)

Contrary to *Distinction* (1984) which investigates almost the entire scope of social practices and

preferences comparatively across the social fabric, this study is limited to the realm and perspective of *profesionales*, and a contextual analysis of categories inherent to a discourse fixing meaning on both the fluidity and the stable patterns of social relations and stylistic expressions. Our main concern, however, is the aspect of how taste is given a social meaning, and the locus wherein this is produced. I am interested in discerning in what way social associations have a bearing on an object's or practice's desirability; what it is made to signify and as such, how ownership or possession of this communicates, among other things, a certain taste. A debate that follows naturally from this is whether meaning is produced by habitus, or if it is already inscribed and thus imposed by external forces.

Suggested sources of meaning

Douglas and Isherwood (1979) state that goods are "good to think". To the matter at hand, I am relating this to what social associations goods, or objects and practices, evoke in the eye of the beholder. From this point of view, it should be clear that taste is nothing natural, although, as Bourdieu suggests, often arbitrarily misrecognised as such. However, I hope to illustrate through the remainder of this chapter and throughout the text, that taste is foremost an actualised or commoditized preference that, when amounting to the project of life's stylisation, communicates a social distaste or desire; one that generates social distance and mimesis both vertically and horizontally in the social structure.

Lee (1993) argues that in many instances, cultural goods have already been given a potential meaning and symbolic value prior to the introduction as the symbolic goods of lived experience. He stresses though, that there has to be identified a dialectic between outside agency of advertising and market strategies, and the instruments of perception with which consumers come to meet goods. We know that most people at some stage consume at whim or impulse, and that overall rational consumer conduct as outlined by Friedman (1957) is frequently proven ill conceived in most cultures. The atypical purchase or the aesthetically deviating object is subordinate to the general pattern of a preference. This relates to the issue of a homology of preference, a coherency in taste across the range of commodities associated with different scopes and realms of the (one and the same) lifestyle (Bourdieu, 1984). The question is whether an object or practice can make its impact in a culture with a ready-made meaning attached to it. Lee feels that regarding the work of Bourdieu,

"...there is a complete failure to consider the impact of the object of consumption in its guise as a commodity and inscribed with meanings and preferred use-values at a production level. While it is certainly true that commodities become the objects of consumption, and are used by people as symbolic co-ordinates for the mapping and construction of social relations, this should not lead us to assume that the powers of the advertisers, designers, marketers, or point-of-sale strategists in general are negligible in the discursive framing of those co-ordinates." Lee (1993:38-39)

Scholarly literature on modern consumption is littered with references to the powerless and stupefied individual in the market of mass consumption characteristic of capitalist societies. Cultural industries, Marcuse claims (1986), provide new needs in the consumer. These needs are naturalised in the commodity form of modern societies, and the "emergence of affluent middle classes has made the social relations of exploitation hidden beneath the illusion of new classless social democracies difficult to decipher" (see Lee, 1993:40-50). Berger shares a similar view in stating that capitalism survives by imposing false standards of what is desirable (Berger, 1972). This might be regarded overly normative, and it is largely an essentialism whereby the agency and soul attributed to a phenomenon like capitalism discards the autonomy of social relations. Also in a Marxist vein, Jahlly has suggested that advertising is an industry involved in theft and reappropriation of meaning. Based on the social relations defining the commodity at production level, separated from that sphere and introduced to the market, the advertising industry are refilling emptied goods with new meaning, meaning that is suited new use-values (1989). More to the point of social meaning, Williams (1962) argues that from a sensibly materialist perspective, advertising would not make sense. In order for it to work, objects must be validated in fantasy by association. This is what Haug relates to when he talks about consumption being defined in terms of fantasy and desire, in the aesthetised appearance of modern commodity form (Haug, 1986). Related to what I have suggested earlier, objects and practices are associated with alluring or unwanted lifestyles, and the stylisation of existence finds its reason or motivation in social mimesis or actively seeking distance.

Baudrillard is concerned with how capitalism in its alliance with advertising imposes itself on cultural forms such as consumption. Baudrillard confronts classic Marxism in its definition of commodity use-value. Lee explains:

"...while Marx had so rigorously unveiled the logic of exchange-value as the naturalisation of the social relations of production, he had failed to identify the fact that in use-value there was expressed the social relations that were

constituted within the sphere of *consumption* " (Lee, 1993)

The entire network of social- and class-relations of modern capitalist society is here inscribed in the realm of consumption. For Baudrillard, capitalism attempts to impose a social order through the naturalised relationship between commodities and a socially determined structured system of uses, utilities and needs. For Baudrillard, the sign-value, the meaning of the object and not the object itself is what we consume (Baudrillard, 1986). He suggests though, that these sign-values derive from the forces of capitalist cultural industries. In this perspective, the consumer is left passive, totally dominated by the sign-value produced and tyrannically conveyed by objects, in turn effecting changes in consumer needs and behaviour - and tastes, we might add.

A different point of view is taken by Douglas and Isherwood (1979) in their anthropological and economic synthesis on goods. One of the basic arguments of the book is that "goods make visible and stable categories of culture" (1979:38). The argument is furthered through the example of the role of goods as adjuncts in ritual events or cultural institutions. From this perspective goods can be seen as instrumental in fixing public meanings, as they are "good to think", and exhibit a favourable associable quality. Examples are provided as goods serve as markers for events, which based on the frequency, is ranked according to status. Viewing Douglas and Isherwood`s argument in contrast to Baudrillard, the question of the source of power to determine meaning of goods strikes one as obvious. As Lee suggests, for Baudrillard "the delineation of structures of social meaning is seen to originate from external agencies such as advertising and the media" (Lee, 1993). The production site for cultural meaning as argued by Douglas and Isherwood on the other hand, seem to locate itself inside the dynamics of a relatively autonomous mode of cultural action. As for choice of action, seeing as individuals must choose and use goods according to conventions defining social division and cultural differences, this is not something voluntary as such. However, consumption patterns reflecting preferences of social groups are presented as departing from a conscious and purposeful management of symbolic goods. This implies that all social agents are in full cognisance of existing rules, codes and conventions, and use goods accordingly. More importantly, it would also suggest that all social agents would, although deprived of many of the goods due to various constraints of social positioning, share the knowledge of the meaning-content pertaining to goods and practices. On this point, I remain unconvinced. Goods make visible and stable cultural conventions, but cultural conventions also have different meaning for different social groups. For Douglas and

Isherwood, the partitioning of goods is by extension, the expression of social partitioning. Categories of people and groups are seen to pre-exist categories of things and objects. "The significance of goods is reduced to a status where they simply indicate existing and pre-established social division and categories" (Lee, 1993).

This might be incomplete for cultural studies scholars like Lee, however, I feel that we are at the essence of goods when relating to social partitioning and differences. The matter of the ready-made meaning versus perception, really boils down to the question of impressionability. Are social individuals impressionable? Of course, however, Bourdieu for one would claim that our impressionability is already conditioned, and predisposition by our habitus. There is a predictability to how we respond to the unheralded and the unforeseen.

Relating to the gospel of outside influences

The presence of lifestyle engineers

It is certainly not impossible to identify dominant aesthetics within the social strata to which my informants pertain, that of *profesionales*. While we have made the admission that perception is an internal process of attributing meaning, goods, commodities and practices generally arrive with an intended meaning. These external forces, however, do not talk to a population at large, and the ideals they aim to establish are certainly not accessible across the entire social fabric. Let us consider these forces, the language they speak and to whom. To what extent are informants exposed to agents devoted to create ideals? As young (most of them) professionals, they work five days a week, on average from 9-10 in the morning to 19-20 in the evening, with a long lunch break at around 2 in the afternoon. This work rhythm does not allow for much daytime television, a broadcasting segment primarily occupied with celebrity gossip and fashion. We know that several of them attend universities after work a couple of days a week. In short, professional life in Argentina entails long days outside the home.

Lifestyle magazines such as Vogue, Marie-Claire, Cosmopolitan, etc, are not part of informants' reading habits, as opposed to publications on decoration and travel.⁽⁶³⁾ It cannot be denied that television and printed media normally provide the strongest and most concentrated medium for directly advertising commodities and more indirectly preaching ideals. I have made the admission that commodities are produced and promoted to create a desire (Haug, 1986) - a desire

that finds its reference in the idea of a certain lifestyles - whether they are cosmetics, clothing, beverages, furniture, travels or other leisure activities. Apart from the intensified form of the message, there is also the quantitative aspect - the sheer number of television channels transmitting and magazines in circulation. There is a lot of offer, even though, in their conformity of fronting largely the same aesthetic, they don't offer a whole lot. This refers to the character of the contents of the marketing and promotion - a character that aids in discerning dominant prescriptions of ideals. There are several channels devoted to fashion and body care broadcasting around the clock. Some of the programs are exclusively about *haute couture* - items rendering themselves inaccessible for normal use.

Fitness programs are in abundance, often centred on the host and a personal trainer, specifically reflecting/inspiring the mode of workout growing most rapidly in popularity throughout the upper-middle classes. There are programs dealing entirely with medical procedures like implants, suction and facial cosmetic surgery as if they were the most trivial and conventional means to enhance one's beauty. Among the urban upper classes but also increasingly throughout the middle classes, this is a widely practiced form of modifying one's personal exterior. These trends are easily identifiable as having spread out from Northern American high society lifestyle, to middle class consumerism and southwards throughout the privileged classes of Latin America. There are also a variety of programs themed around decoration and travel, more often than not, with items and destinations presented being out of reach even for many *profesionales*.⁽⁶⁴⁾

What is a common feature about all of these programs however, is the spectacularisation of the hostess (usually a woman), and the blatant focus on her appearance. This is done through minute-long sequences of the hostess in a number of seductive and sexually suggestive poses exhibiting equally as many outfits, all done in the format so as to simulate a model photo session. This format serves to present the program imposing an idea of legitimacy on the subject matter of fashion - an by extension, a lifestyle of beauty and success. In creating this image, the association of style and its bona fide expression is determined. In other words, while styles and expressions may be ephemeral or evanescent, the defining agency lies in the institutions and mediators who possess the mandate to legitimise it (Bourdieu, 1984). To paint the picture that this more or less sums up the contents of Argentinean television is of course not the idea, and it would be a misrepresentation. The point is to provide the observation that this offer pretends to exist. I say pretend, as it is an offer that is aimed almost exclusively on the upper classes and tentatively the upper middle classes, and as such, for

most people actually constituting their ratings, represents an illusion or stylistic escapism.

Then there are the practical circumstances around and reasons for which informants do not interact with these engineers of lifestyles. Style as preached, prescribed or suggested, does not seem to inform, challenge or work at informants in a significant way through the mediums that are ideally designed to be consumed *in the home*. This is another reminder that they cater primarily to upper and upper middle class housewives unemployed by choice. But even though we might be content that neither glossy and seductive magazines nor the pantheon of televised fashion gurus see their mantras heeded in the everyday domestic realm of *profesionales*, it would be premature and naively presumptuous to conclude that the latter remain immune to the forces of trend-mongering that goes on in the public space of contemporary metropolis. We are again obliged to address the implications of such practicalities as time and space.

The implications of stepping out

It is my experience that young *profesionales*, and maybe particularly females, cherish the professional life outside the home. In choosing this path in life, many break with the patterns of their mothers, many of whom are educated at university level but unemployed by choice. There is no belittling of the latter on the part of the former, on the contrary there seems to be a recognition towards the choices made by their mothers. However, what is perceived to be the *laissez-faire*, ostentatious and high consumption lifestyle of explicitly wealthy women of the northern urban barrios and the upscale *countries* and *barrios privados*, which is neither associated with professional work nor home building or child rearing, is regarded as idleness, and in a discourse of duties connected to the relationship of family and work, providing and preserving, these “ladies who lunch” are found morally compromised.

Most of my informants have their daily work somewhere in the city, resulting in daily contact with people and commerce. However, none of them are confined to an office space the entire working day. Flexible working routines or particular assignments such as soliciting information from various institutions, allow for a fluid contact with the social world in process outside the office. Accustomed though the informants may be to this scene, this is never the less a pool of impressions. Working in the downtown financial area of Buenos Aires they are also within a stone’s throw from the city’s quintessential shopping avenues, like Calle Florida and Avenida Santa Fe. If not in a professional capacity, these avenues with an unlimited amount of shops boasting the names

of foreign designers and a few luxury department stores in between, are also sites from where to solicit information. This is not information about civil codes, regulations or resolutions, but that of cuts, colours and *quotas* (alternative price listed for purchases done in payments). This pool of information, though, is not always the one most sought after for dipping. Decades have passed since the industry of commodity positioning and the spatial politics of neoliberalism started exploring the potential of the experiential aspect of consumption (Sassen, 1991 and Baumann 1994). With the emergence of malls in the porteño landscape, Buenos Aires represents no exception.⁽⁶⁵⁾

There is a correlation between *shoppings* and location; the upscale ones are invariably situated in wealthy neighbourhoods, or outside the city, in the centre of a cluster of *barrios privados* and *countries*. The spatial politics of recreation and consumption is a social partitioning in practice rendering the poor and increasingly working class people confined to parks, open fields and low price supermarkets, whereas middle class segments, also very much in structural reconfiguration, cling on to and cherish their malls, *confiterias* and clubs. However, this has implications for the porteno perception of self and others; access to a mall, a restaurant table or a *barrio privado* club house does in no way grant immunity from classification, as if these were check list points ensuring an emotional inclusion or willingness with whom to identify.

Markers and giveaways - recognising taste

The knowledge that young *profesionales* receive information about current trends primarily through direct contact with commodities displayed at the point-of-sale, or displayed by other individuals, yields insight into the pattern of their social habits. However, it does little to explain the selection process of approving or eventually appropriating an aesthetic through the acquisition of an object. We do not respond, positively or negatively, *to the aesthetic form* of a commodity simply because of it being displayed. What does have a significant bearing though, is *where, how* and *by whom*, it comes to be displayed, and the associations this evokes. Various categories denote aesthetics that are associated specifically with certain lifestyles, and social segments. It is time to closer explore these.

Mastering the *cheto* experience

Carolina is 21. She has for most of her years in school attended one of the expensive, and widely

regarded as exclusive, bilingual colleges, where classes are taught as much in English as Spanish. She now studies political science at the public University of Buenos Aires. Apart from that, she is also the editor of *Write On*, the monthly magazine for and by youths published by the English speaking newspaper *Buenos Aires Herald*. She was offered the job after she took part representing Argentina in a youth debate team contest abroad. She lives in a flat in Belgrano with her two parents and three siblings, two of which are recently born twins (the parents planned to have just one more). Her mother has taken an indefinite leave of work (unpaid) to attend to the twins, but she might return to her professional life, practicing as a lawyer. Her father is an accountant with educational background from Harvard, USA. He runs a business consultant company, he is president of the high profile social club, Club de Amigos which takes up a substantial part in the barrio of Palermo with its golf courses and tennis courts, he is the retired president of the football club Ferro, and he was offered the post of sports minister under the De La Rúa government, which he declined due to the commitments to his business. Politically, like the traditional porteño bulk of voters, her parents are *Radicales*. Her mother, through her profession as a lawyer, has also worked extensively with human rights cases. Carolina is obviously from a family situated comfortably in what could be called the most upper layers of the middle classes. She talks about the ambience at the club where she sometimes goes at night during the weekends:

"It's on the Costanera (Norte, as oppose to Costanera Sur which is used at weekends by working class people to sit along the promenade, drinking, talking and eating the hours away). First of all, it can be quite troublesome getting in. I don't have any problem since I know the dj there... I met him at another gig, he's now a friend of mine... he makes sure everything goes smoothly with the bouncers. There is normally a presence of the *farandula* there, models most often, and the people accompanying them. You can say there is a lot of social pressure in these circles... you will be noticed for what you wear, how you look, how you present yourself... it might be a good rule of thumb that if you catch a lot of glances, then you're made... if no one bothers to look at you twice, then it's time to worry."

So what can one do in order not to feel as a fish out of water?

"Well, most people there know what to wear and what not to. You see the other people, you pick up on the latest, the current trends and stuff, it's no big deal. In behaving as well. Everybody dances in the same manner... you learn the moves quickly observing, and everybody assimilates it. Things catch on automatically... I guess most people there think of themselves and the club as *cheto*... is fashion, it's happening, this is the place they have to be. But you have to have your sensibilities sharpened. Allegedly there is even now a *cheto* way of *saying cheto*! And that's supposedly the most *cheto* thing of all, saying it like this (utters the word with a slightly lazy pronunciation of the ch-sound)... it's getting a

bit too much, I tell you (laughing and smiling overbearingly) ...anyway, that's where we go most Fridays if we go out. I go there with my friends from high school, the ones I still keep in touch with. I could never take my companions from university there. Those are two separate worlds. In this respect I guess I am a different person when I am with them...They are different you know, more serious... they have other agendas... some are a piece of work though - some of them are self-proclaimed anarchists even... you get the picture? That's just ridiculous, you know... I don't really take them seriously and they certainly wouldn't do anyone any good if they had a real say in things, but ok. But yes, I imagine there would be some resentment between the two camps... like both of them would say 'how can you be with those people?' about the other."

Cheto describes an aesthetic, but it certainly also connotes a lifestyle, and suggests the means necessary for this. In a club like this, the aesthetic of the lifestyle is communicated in its Mecca. This is where it is consecrated as it is symbolically intensified, evoking the imagery of a lifestyle - of success, economical prowess and beautiful friends, all yielding profits in their capacity of status symbols - and the liturgy of this aesthetic is subsequently communicated elsewhere outside this temple of taste.

Of course, considering Carolina's reflections of the jet set scene, one can wonder whether one is ever fully comfortable once the aesthetic, gestures and comportment - the bodily *hexis* (Bourdieu, 1991) that is *cheto* - has been successfully undertaken. In fact, can it ever be, inasmuch as this, like most other, is a category working at forms and expressions of severe fluidity? This is a *continuous process of having access to what is regarded vital information* - for this group, a *sacra* of fashion - and thus the necessary coordinates for the map of taste.

We might conceptualise "mixing it at the club" as an inversed *communitas*. The successful participation of the stylistically homogenous practice inside the place is a communication of a lifestyle, a sharing and intercommunication of an imagery, a perception of stylistic collectivity, takes for granted (and basis itself on) more than suspends the structures of the outside world's daily life; the *societas*. Individuals leave the sacred ground with newly accumulated knowledge about the symbolic markers of the group of reference. Outside in everyday practice and observation, they will be able to identify the markers, and more importantly, *with* them, as they have taken part in the celebration and intensified communication of them. A silent communication and identification of these symbols has a reifying effect on the unarticulated but tenacious solidarity between social agents, conducive to the conceptualisation of status groups, having its foundation in an assumption of a shared lifestyle.

Carolina admits to moving between social fields. One, to which she has stylistic affinity, is made

up of friends from earlier years at expensive private schools and who to this date very much share the objective and commoditized lifestyle that she does, and another, wherein her intellectual pursuits take place, which include people largely from walks of life different from the former. She concedes to there being antagonism between the two groups, and she diplomatically places herself in the middle denouncing both the excessive shallowness of the former and the misguidedness of the latter.

Communicating distaste

Whereas *cheto* might denote a lifestyle that most people, certainly *profesionales* aspire to and indeed widely enjoy, there are correspondingly stylistic expressions that must be avoided. Similar to *cheto*, other forms are also captured by the deployment of categories fixing social meaning to stylistic expressions. I have on innumerable occasions recorded these categories in use between my informants, however, they are invariably used in exchanges between confidants, like family members, or within a circle of friends. Should there be present an unknown, a social outsider from another, lower, walk of life, some of these categories will be dispensed with altogether.⁽⁶⁶⁾ One such term is that of *grasa* ⁽⁶⁷⁾ (literally meaning fat or grease). *Grasa*, as used by my informants can refer to both an appearance and a practice, however it is invariably linked to display. Those of my informants who speak English choose to translate it as showy or vulgar. Another informant chose the word tacky.

Maria's family has experienced ups and downs in life. They have moved around a lot due to her parents' restlessness and inclinations for trying new places to live. They have lived in flats in various parts of the city and they lived for many years in a *country* in the province of Buenos Aires, a place of which María and particularly her mother have many fond memories. The family has suffered economic hardship at times, to the extent of having severe difficulties making ends meet. This would affect the family diet, characterised by the mother's strict economisation, and María having many of her clothes sewn by her mother. Most of her friends today are relatively recently acquired. She has kept contact with only one of her friends from the days of adolescence. Her family has moved up in life. After her father finished his accountancy studies well into adulthood, a financial stability laid the foundations for a new every day life. Her mother quit her job as a schoolteacher quoting the work as being "not worth it any longer, considering the pay I got out of it and the time and effort that went into it". During the Menem years, her family has enjoyed a comfortable life with access to materiality and an everyday comfort of stability. Maria went to an expensive private high school,

her family could afford to buy her the clothes she wanted and she could participate in all leisure time activities as her friends did. Later, her family paid her tuition at the private university of Belgrano.

She usually saw her friends during the summer holidays as all the families went to the Atlantic coast. More recently, she travelled for 40 days, to New York and the principal capitals of Europe. However, the family has never forgotten the lean years, and both her mother and Maria are careful in the way they spend money, expressing a preference for quality but never in excess. To this day, Maria, an avid shopper, never buys designer labels, as “they are not worth they price”. Nor does she hang out at the jet-set venues such as the hottest night clubs in and around the city. As such, she has broken off with her old school friends, and a lifestyle that to her very much sums up *the practice of seeing and being seen*.

While Maria is currently living in the flat in the city, her parents have a somewhat ambivalent relationship to their surrounding environment; in a big house in an upscale *barrio privado* outside the city. They have two new cars, and the three of them go on holidays every year for several weeks to various parts to the country, staying in hotels or cabins. Distancing oneself, or choosing not to pursue the lifestyle of her former companions and their families, does not imply that she has acquired more popular customs and inclinations. Her family very much live the retreated and private lifestyle of privilege. The reader will remember the disgust they have towards the popular displays of these public areas of leisure. *Grasa* encapsulates this display for Maria, and she discloses how she perceives its aesthetic:

"Well, *grasa* is ... well you know it when you see it. People who use for example very flashy shirts, in very bright colours...you know, shiny, glitzy... and a lot of jewellery too, that's typical; fat gold chains, big brilliant rings and their shirts unbuttoned all the way down below their chests...so it's like that... and well, like that shirt you have, the black one, a bit glossy, I guess I have to say that's a bit *grasa*. It's very *bailanta* you know, and *bailantas* are typically *grasa*. But mind you, *grasa* doesn't mean a social class... rich people too can be *grasa*, and very often they are... in Brazil, you will find a lot of examples of *grasa*, but they are different you know, the Brazilians... they don't care about what others think, and in Europe... in England for example, you will see a lot of people dressing in a way that here would be *grasa*, but you know, that's the fashion among young people over there".

María recognises the representation of *grasa* as a *legitimate style*, albeit one to which she would never subscribe. Visible characteristics of this expression are mentioned, such as particular garments, accessories and the way of wearing these. It is an aesthetic that breaks with some conventions of

refinement. It is loud in colour, daring in fabric and indecent in its connotations through the act of wearing it. She draws on the *bailanta* as an illustration of its typical expression. *Bailantas* are a kind of nightclubs that host mainly working class youths, found in and around Buenos Aires. The music played in these *boliches* (any place of public entertainment, nowadays referring mainly to dance halls and discos) will invariably be that of *quarteto* and in particular *cumbia*. None of my informants would ever entertain the idea of going to a *bailanta*. As for the legitimacy of *grasa* as a style, this has its explanation in *its identifiability*. Whether it is the *bailantero* or the *nouveau riche*, they both may exhibit signs that correspond to the *clase media profesional* concept of *grasa*. What makes it a style is the homology of the signs exhibited within the mode. One thing is often displayed in a certain way or complemented by another. It makes up a picture, an entirety, and a whole image. It is not easily confused - it is unambiguous. Furthermore, it is granted legitimacy as a style in its deliberation and intention. That is to say, a *grasa* person might be carefully styled and groomed even though his hair might be very long. There is an apparent premeditation and effort gone into the appearance possible to discern by others. There is a *matching of bad taste* in the eyes of the beholder *profesional*, and that is the virtue by which the recognition, though certainly not subscription, of style and aesthetic is given.

Recognising illegitimate privilege - the conflict of taste and class

Referring to the public life of the parks and the *bailantas*, it is clear that the foremost social association of this style is that of working class, however as implied, it can also correspond to the middle classes, and even those economically situated higher up in the social structure. The latter associations finds its reference in those who have come by fortune, but not the taste; those who have the means to be, in the eyes of the *profesional* beholder, excessive in their bad taste. As such, it translates to the proverb that “money can’t buy you everything”, good taste certainly being one of them. Maria and I were strolling through the neighbourhood where her parents live. The plan of the barrio resembles an upscale Northern American suburban neighbourhood; long, straight alleys with huge oak trees on each sides. The lots are measured out and separated with geometrical precision like a chessboard. Impeccable cobble stone driveways, lawns like the green of St Andrews and neat flowerbeds lead up to the houses and the gardens round the back. A board of proprietors decide on the architectural policies, ensuring the stylistic homogeneity. Most houses are English country style brick houses or Northern Mediterranean influenced. These places represent residential concentration

of wealth. The image is contrary to the traditional Argentinean barrios as it is a landscape of foreign private architecture, vast green forested areas, open lawns and flowerbeds in the mould of formalism, apart from the huge club house, tennis courts, swimming pools and the high concrete walls surrounding the areas guarded by armed watchmen at the monitored gates. The neatness and the structure of the place, even the minute detail that goes into the planting of the trees gives the barrio an air of a vast constructed set on a film studio. María commented on some outdoor ornaments in the garden outside one of the big English style brick houses:

“Look at all that stuff over there... *Ay que grasa*. Look at those fake wooden mallard ducks completely ridiculing the image of the house. And all those rubber things in the pool... makes the whole place look so cheap, so bad taste... You will see this... like that other house over there (pointing towards the other end of the barrio), that beautiful light yellow Italian style house, with those ghastly red and blue bright lights in the garden, making it look like a cheap nightclub. Some people just don't know. It's typical of people with money but with no taste... or culture. “

Some weeks later, Maria found out from her mother that the owner of the house exhibiting the mallard ducks in the garden is a mechanic who owns his own garage/workshop. This confirmed her assumptions of the display being the product of a combination of a small private business and working class taste.

Inside this *barrio*, there is an expectation in the informants of how a garden, a house plan etc is supposed to look, after having grown accustomed to it. Things like the mallard ducks or the bright illumination stand out. They might be regarded naïve, tacky or vulgar. As aesthetic stigmas, they are associated with another social segment; they are expected to be witnessed somewhere else, and they are perceived as out of place because they are evoking images of lifestyles that ideally take place outside this privileged realm of the *barrio privado*. Again the concept of the *grasa* is associated with working class, or at least, with working class taste. These are the things they would respond to. They are markers, and they give away their owners.

Grasa is not explicitly a class category inasmuch as it doesn't necessarily suggest the economic standing of the person or group in question. However, it is clear that it is made to pertain to individuals or groups who do not have the cultural means necessary to appreciate the forms and expressions deemed legitimate and proper for *profesionales* (for example the correctly understated way of decorating ones garden), and, they are deprived of these means as they are lacking in culture, or *cultura*, a term used by informants with reference both to social instruction and higher formal

education.

This challenges the legitimacy of the lifestyle perceived undertaken and enjoyed by the stigmatised owners. It invalidates everything about their concrete, brick and pastoral presentation of themselves to the rest of the *barrio*. In fact, should they even be there? Certainly not according to those prone to claim that such a lifestyle, such a haven, should be reserved for meticulously and soberly planning individuals and families who are harvesting the fruits of years of education and responsible labour. If *profesionales* are in title to a better life than small scale business men and shop keepers, then workers are certainly a startling sight inside the neighbourhood. For what else can they be, displaying the things they indeed do? Working class taste is all right - in its designated areas. It is however, not nearly as comforting when trespassing, and very likely, unwittingly revealing itself as just that.

Seeing distaste as social pretension

As established, a key component of *profesionales*' self-affirmation and trusted mark of distinction, a mark that generates certain social expectations, is his formal education, heralded and legitimised in a diploma. The access to, and empowering of the educational systems as a social partitioner is instrumental to the groups self-conception, and as such, its identity. Inwardly consolidating a group identity, outwards, with reference to education, it means the unwillingness to recognise the autodidact.⁽⁶⁸⁾ Though the effort of self-improvement is very much valorised among *profesionales*, the project of the autodidact is in general discourse devalued, in that it is foremost a testament to the failure of commitment to the right and proper institutions - the easy way out.

28 year-old Damian has a different educational and family background from most of my other informants. He works as a computer programmer and website designer, both freelance and regularly employed by a sports TV channel. Originally from the *barrio* of Flores, he has also moved around during his upbringing. He spent many years in the *barrio* of Once, before he ended up in Belgrano. He lived with his father for several years after his parents got divorced. The father is an immigrant from Majorca, the mother is one of the thousands of psychologists with their own practice in Buenos Aires.

Although advised very early on by his father that he should pursue a career as either an architect or a lawyer, Damian told me "I found out quite quickly out that architecture wasn't for me". After a couple of semesters he left the studies. Having played around with the computer from childhood days, he

developed this interest further with the arrival of the Internet in Argentina in the mid-90's. As there were no formal studies for this at the time in Buenos Aires, he turned autodidact, learning his way around programming and web designing by obtaining the literature necessary through second hand purchases from USA via the web.

Beside his work and computer interests, he has always nursed a passion for music, and decided to keep up with this and even intensify it after "sessions in psychotherapy had made me realise that I needed music as a part of my life". He now rents a flat in Belgrano with his wife ten years his junior, with whom he also plays in a band with two other girls the age of his wife. As ever, progressive and critical of what he regards elitist assimilation and aspirations of some strata of the porteño middle classes, he is uncomfortable with the social connotations he knows *grasa* to carry among them.

"To me, it's a disrespectful term. *Grasa* used to mean...it depends...low class, or bad taste, something that was not part of the business elite, so I guess, tango was *grasa*, and football, but I think it's very ugly and arrogant. I suppose I like *grasa* things... popular things are often *grasa*, like popular music that come from low classes, like The Rolling Stones in England... something that is thought of as vulgar. Middle class identify with the elite, that which remains of the middle class identify with elite, and those who still have middle class values are identifying more with popular cultures. You know the *cumbia*? I don't like *cumbia*, it's primitive, but I validate the phenomenon.... these *cumbia* artists are being exploited by companies in the process of their commercialisation... they are still very much regarded as *grasa*, by elite and middle class who identify with former, *cumbia* is used by it's performers to talk about things that are wrong in Argentina.

There is solidarity and antipathy on different levels in Damian's account. He speaks of these phenomena at the same time as his observations are charged with them. The break-up of the middle classes and the subsequent social polarisation he means to identify, is at the core of the concept of *grasa* rendering itself to the disposal of the middle classes in upwards social mobility, as a means to distance themselves from what they are able to ascribe negative values. To him, the social mimesis apparent among middle classes and their remnants has made *grasa* synonymous with things common; that of lower class and that which one does not want to be associated with. From this perspective, *grasa* means popular, and the requirement for communicating taste appropriate within the privileged realms of the social structure is to develop and express a distaste for the popular and its associated aesthetic.

Damian gives his assessment of assimilating the elite and abandoning class solidarity on the part of *profesionales* by assuming a right to define middle class values. How can he be so sure of the

illegitimacy and counterfeit character of the new middle classes? Damian's point is that the middle classes are seen to be in change, neither the elite nor the lower classes. Post-transition connotes ending up outside the social space of origin. An acquired distaste for the popular is to him socially ascending middle class' familiarisation and celebration of the symbols to which they have aspired.

This leads him to lambaste what he sees as the arrogance with which elitist middle class people discard and ridicule the *cumbia*. His indignation on behalf of the *cumbia* is provoked by the lack of respect offered, not to the genre, but to its practitioners. He, "validates the phenomenon", ascribing it positive value as an agency for social criticism. He is, however, keen to point out that he does not grant it much artistic merit. To shed some more light on this, we can go back to our earlier intimations with Bourdieu, and the notions of capital. Damian regards *cumbia* as primitive. He no doubt refers to the extremely monorhythmic structure and naive arrangements so characteristic of this genre. Having stressed his passion for music and the fundamental need for music in his life experience, he is only willing to present his relationship to music as legitimate, i.e., that of genuine and sophisticated appreciation, and of a more sublimated character than would be enjoyed by the practitioners of the *cumbia*. In categorising *cumbia* the way he does, he might be telling us that his knowledge of music grants him the license to classify it as such, but he also makes allowances for *us* to suggest that had he expressed an affinity for the *cumbia*, it would severely put into question or devalue his cultural capital of which his musical proficiency is a significant component.

Fluidity of meaning and hegemony of categories

We can speculate only with limited authority on what will be the manifestations of *grasa* and *cheto* in the future, and we might not know if they will be called other things altogether. What we can be sure of, however, is that such categories *will* exist and they *will* find their expression insofar as stylistic expressions and social displays continue to yield distinct associations founded in the hierarchy of lifestyles. These forms and expressions invariably are introduced to an already differentiated social landscape, and will consequently be given diverse meanings. Trends tend to be ephemeral and change quickly. Demands are put on the sensibilities to decide what to make of these. In the case of cultural goods, and with reference to taste, it has been the argument of this chapter that the stable categories to which Douglas and Sherwood (1979) refer, are best found in discourses of classification ordering the social structure.

Drawing on Bourdieu, we may suggest that the developing of sensibilities that enable us to

assimilate and imitate, as well as discern and associate, is contingent upon access to certain physical scenes, and the moving over time within certain social spaces (whether they be private colleges, gated neighbourhoods, malls or upscale nightclubs) - two conditions that are often mutually inclusive. This should allow us to say something about the relationship between association of style and changing aesthetics or stylistic content; in short, new trends. This becomes an issue of access, and of possessing and displaying an apt sensibility in the moment of the effervescence in which the group goes through the process of putting into practice or taking on modifications to existing aesthetics or expressions. *As long as the group, and the style associated with this group, already has legitimacy in or is connoted by a category (which classifies people as well as taste), the modifications will serve as the latest representations of this category as visualised and communicated by the group.* This I hold to be paramount as to how new forms take on social meaning upon cultural introduction.

5

Powerful symbols and subtle styles; acquisition, cultivation and the morality of aesthetics

I was having lunch one day in the house of Dora, wife of Carlos and mother of Maria. Sometimes Dora would do my laundry as well as seeing to it that I didn't combine fieldwork and malnutrition. She asked me: "I washed one of your shirts the other day, it struck me as I saw inside the collar that it was Polo Ralph (porteño way of saying Ralph Lauren Polo), but the polo player didn't figure, *la marca*. What kind of shirt is that? Did you buy it here?" I told her I had brought it with me from Norway, where I had bought it some time ago, and that that line seemingly came without the famous mounted polo player on the chest.

"How strange, I have never seen it. No, you see, because it caught my attention, and I thought you could never have bought it here. They wouldn't sell them here. No one here is going to buy a shirt Polo Ralph without the *marca*. 'What would be the point?' they would say. You see how people are here?"

I had already noticed many porteños' association with this classic brand, as well as others, as they were displayed on many of the garments that made up the relatively homogenous dress sense among urban male *profesionales*; chinos, jeans, piquet shirts, oxford fabric shirts in sober or pastel colours, conventional cotton sweaters, deck shoes and loafers among young (25 and older) and middle aged for informal occasions; wing tipped brogue shoes, woollen or corduroy trousers, cardigan or v-neck lambs wool sweaters and tweed blazers for middle aged and senior citizens. I observed a widespread consumption of traditionally expensive brands, but I also noticed the absence of what can be called alternative styles; the image was very much that of "young republicans" and "English country gentleman". As for women, I found it harder to identify the allegiance sworn to brands, although the style rendered itself equally homogenous in its own way, in it being what might be called conventionally feminine; high heeled shoes, sandals and boots, sleek leather moccasins, skirts or tight jeans and trousers, blouses, short and neat leather jackets and of course the handbag most often immaculately matching the shoes. The garments generally emphasized the body figure, one that along with the omnipresent hairstyle of long and straight, often dyed blonde hair (69), suggested that current female beauty ideal was a lean, non-voluptuous, well groomed, relatively pale

skinned woman. These generalizations form an observable stylistic pattern among professional porteños in the most affluent *barrios*. I carried these images around in my head, the comments made by Dora, and informants talking about beautiful, elegant, stylish, as well as, conservative, boring, insecure and, imitating porteños. What to make of it all? How did old porteño narratives and idea of cosmopolitanism fit into all of this?

Snapshots of people and preferences

Safe style at knock-off prices

I was sitting one winter afternoon in a downtown *confitería* reading *El Clarín* (70), coming across an advertisement about a Ralph Lauren outlet opening next day in the *barrio* of Palermo. I decided to check out the place. I had the address, I located the street, but the locale was so small and inconspicuous that I hardly noticed it. Furthermore, there were no signs outside clearly stating that this was the place. I stepped up to the open door, finding myself struggling to get inside because of the crowd that was already there. It was about 2 in the afternoon, a working day. Most of the people scurrying around inside were men, from 30 to 60. Almost all of them wore suits and carried brief cases, clearly indicating that these were *profesionales* during their lunch break. No one, except for two middle-aged women, was talking. Some were asking questions about size to the two attendants who were busy servicing the checkout queue from behind the counter. People were roaming from shelf to shelf inside the place, quickly inspecting the shirts, pants, blazers and sweaters. If one item didn't catch their interest they tossed it aside moving feverishly on to the next pile. After a while, this made an organized search impossible, and the browsers seemed to become more frantic. The provisional and mobile dressing rooms were quickly creating lines. Trying-on of shirts and sweaters was now done in between the shelves. The merchandise started to become scarce after a while, some items remaining, unable to convince the browsers. I investigated some of the prices, and concluded that they were on average at least half of normal retail prices.

I decided that I might as well take advantage of the situation. I started to take a closer look around the small room. The walls were out of sight with shelves stacked so closely not leaving any space in between them. Racks on wheels were lined up equally densely across the floor, barely showing the old and office-like carpet covering the floor. The counter was even more makeshift. It was an old laminated office desk, on top of which was placed a cash register plugged into the wall

behind the vendors. I made my way to the shirts at the back of the room. I was looking for a couple of shirts with French cuffs. I found a whole lot. Strange, I thought. I had seen many porteño businessmen wearing cufflinks. I picked up a couple of items from the pile. I decided on the size and made my way to the endless cue that had miraculously been able to form inside the by now damp and severely oxygen deficient locale, feeling strangely content with my two "Polo Ralph" shirts with no polo players on the chest.

Polo have one of their official shops at the enormous shopping centre *Unicenter* at the northern outskirts of the city. Every late afternoon and evening, but particularly at weekends, this promised land of retail is swamped by thousands of porteños and people from the province. Married couples, sweethearts, families in three generations and friends, all make up the imponderable crowds that gaze at, try on and often purchase items on show. Among a few others, there is in particular one store that is generally very sparsely visited, namely the exquisitely designed and decorated shop of Ralph Lauren. Stepping inside, it is what one might imagine it would be like walking into an upscale gentlemen's club or a social retreat at an IVY-league university half a century ago, with dark wooden panelling, shiny brass fittings, massive mahogany counters, Chesterfield furniture and carpets and wallpaper in soft, sober autumn colours creating a distinguished atmosphere. Impeccably dressed attendants generally not occupied await your approach and leave you to tranquilly browse the shelves, tables and bureaux lavished with the coveted articles. I have been to *Unicenter* a good many times; different hours, days and seasons, but I have invariably observed very few if any potential customers wandering in between the tastefully understated displays, let alone carry anything out of there. The last time I was there I inquired about a pin striped, three button single-breasted wool suit. It came at 2800 pesos, which is more than double the monthly salary of many young *profesionales*.

Affinity and antagonism towards agents of elsewhere

Another store that is decisively more frequented and whose logo is seen on numerous bags carried around in the various hallways and aisles inside the centre, is Zara. This store also has several branches in the centre of the city, amidst consultant agencies, accountant studios, architect offices, and law firms. One of the branches is situated in the middle of *calle Florida*, the quintessential shopping avenue in the city. Zara is a Spanish brand that has branches in most European metropolis, offering the same line in all of them. This is the case for Zara in Buenos Aires

as well.

I met July and Maria one afternoon in the centre, after they had finished their professional duties that day. They suggested we go to Zara for a peek. July hadn't been there in a while, and she wanted to see whether there was something in winter coats. She knew Zara well from European holidays, as did Maria.

Zara is spacious, very wide and with high ceilings. It has three floors; ground floor for women, first floor for children and second floor for men. Shelves and racks are placed with so much space in between that browsing through all the sections takes time and considerable walking. Every section is organised neatly, prices and sizes labelled uncomplicatedly; they are quoted in measures and currencies for various European countries and Argentina, signified by small flags on the labels. The floors are of wooden panel, the walls are white with mirrors in various places. There is an abundance of dressing rooms at the back, located in a hallway created by a false wall. Outside the dressing room area in the women's department are minimalistically designed white leather sofas, often used by waiting spouses or boyfriends. The muzak is unobtrusive; a mellow and low volume stream of contemporary American and Latino soft pop. Attendants are everywhere and inconspicuous at the same time. They will help you only on request. They are all dressed similarly, sporting some ensemble of the current line on display. They keep themselves busy folding and organising garments left behind in the dressing rooms and constantly restoring order by neatly putting them back in the proper shelf or on the right rack. They are all in their 20's, lean, with long straight hair. Two of them attend the check out area, a vast squared counter, receiving customers from both ends and never allowing for cues to develop. They are polite but economical in their interaction with the customer. All credit cards are accepted.

As for the line on offer at Zara, it is clearly classical, in the sense that clothes, regardless of season and indeed trends, are designed within the latitude of a certain concept. This concept is best summed up as not being (sexually) suggestive; it is sober and understated. It is feminine in that cuts are made to communicate the physicality of the wearer, but doing it subtly. Contrary to this quality is what can be termed *llamativo*, something that stands out either in colour, pattern or most typically, in cut (sexually provocative garments). Regarding the Zara collection in contrast to the *llamativo*, we can call it decent but not demure, understated but not anonymous, elegant but not extravagant, and feminine but not suggestive. This image holds true for the men's department as well, albeit with some exceptions. The seemingly timeless presence of the chinos, the corduroys, the

oxford cotton shirts, the waxed jackets, the sweaters and the sport coats, is complemented (or countered) by a more transitory, ephemeral and in-the-moment section. Here we see glossy, shiny, frilled and loudly coloured shirts, there are long sleeved wide necked knitted sweaters meant to be worn without shirts or undergarment, and there are combinations like grey woollen suits and sneakers. After an hour or so in the women's department, most of which I spent on the sofa, we made our way to the checkout to pay for a couple of items July had chosen. After that we headed upstairs to the men's department. We swept through the various sections, ending up at the latest and temporal fashion. I sampled the girls' reaction:

“*Qué mamarracho!* Look at this; it's terrible, no? And what's with this suit and the sneakers? *Es un mamarracho.* And those shirts that the assistants use (white plain shirts but in wrinkled or creped fabric), it's typical *machopostmo.*”

After we left Zara, we went off to a small boutique further down the avenue, dealing mostly in Lacoste. Maria wanted to buy a piquet shirt for her father thinking of his upcoming birthday. As we were inside the store, three young men entered, sporting the style evoking associations with a US rap milieu; baggy pants, expensive trainers, glossy T-shirts and jackets, caps and gold chains. I noticed the girls catching glances at them, trying not to stare. I heard they were from another Latin American country, but I couldn't determine which, as they were talking among themselves. We were choosing a shirt when we overheard one of the guys asking the shopkeeper if his merchandise was real or *trucha* (fake). July instantly reacted, turning to the three men and engaging:

“Listen here! Do you honestly think that this could possibly be *trucha*? A shop like this, in a place like this? How can you even ask that? You just don't do that!” I was taken aback by her reaction, as did the young men appear to be who did not respond, but left shortly after. “It's ok”, the shopkeepers said afterwards, “there was no harm done”. “That's ok”, July responded, “but they come here and expect that they can treat people with the same attitude they do at home. An absolute lack of respect and completely out of place!”

Afterwards we sat down in a *confitería*, and I asked the girls what had really happened in there? Who were they and what did she mean?

J: “Look, those guys were foreigners but you guessed that. I guess they were Colombians, didn't you see they were exactly the same as those guys in the movie we saw, about the Medellín cartel in Colombia? They had the same style and the same aggressive attitude.”

M: “They come here now, from all the other Latin American countries, because it's cheap.”

J: “They never came before, did they? Now they have the opportunity. But the thing is, you see, they come here with

an attitude. Back home, they have money. I don't even want to think how they came into it. Contraband, drugs, what do I know. And they treat the people in their own country as slaves, as shit."

M: "You think there are big differences among people here; well you should travel around on the rest of the continent."

J: "They come here, bringing with them the attitude, thinking they can treat shopkeepers and assistants like trash. Who the hell are they to do that? Who do they think they are? They are just *negros, unos negros de mierda!* They don't have any sense of culture or education, just money, probably illegitimate. Oh my God, I get so upset!"

M: "Tal cual (exactly). You have seen others, haven't you? Latin American ladies wearing gold and leather from top to toe, men with cowboy hats! *Una grasada...* they overdo it, you know, they have no taste, no culture - just attitude and the luck of the moment. Is this the kind of tourism we want?"

We kept talking for a while and I asked her about the concept of *mamarracho*, as opposed to *grasa*, since I felt confident that some of the items displayed in Zara's men's department could have been perceived as the latter.

M: "No, you can't call it *grasa*, because... well, Zara is a European brand, and those are the things they wear over there, it's the current style you know, and they don't have the concept of *grasa*. Here we do, and so we use it about people from here and from the rest of Latin America, because they know what it is. I have this Greek friend I met when I was in London, he lives in Rome now and commutes to Geneva where he has his current project. He would go out to dinner at night wearing *ojotas* (beach slippers)! Can you imagine? But that's the cosmopolitan style in places like London, people don't care very much and you won't get stared at for doing that. Here it's different, and that kind of outfit would be regarded *grasa* if worn here by someone local. And that thing with the sneakers and the suit, that's also the new way, I guess, and I suppose people over there use it. But it's a complete *mamarracho*; it looks ridiculous."

From country comfort to city chic.

I was walking in the downtown area one day with María, and with a whisper and a discrete nod she directed my attention to a young man walking ahead of us. He was wearing a pink cotton shirt, beige chinos, suede loafers, a belt of some rustic design, and a leather and brass key ring attached to his belt. He shortly after entered a building upon which María disclosed that:

"That guy is from a family with *plata* (money). Did you see what he was wearing? Those things are very *cheto*, and in many places they are very expensive. But they are of course very nice. That guy had a typical look of a kid from San Isidro (wealthy residential suburb immediately to the north of Buenos Aires) or those parts. There are many places selling those articles, particularly in the northern *barrios*, the *shoppings* and in the *interior* (inland provinces). We have very

good quality of the leather here, you know, there is no need to buy it abroad. In those places you will see some beautiful things in bags and shoes, especially *carpincho* (suede-like skin of small animal with same name). I have a pair of *carpincho* boots. But some of the stores are very expensive, especially the polo equipment and those things.”

The shoes and the accessories he wore are items that are sold in shops called *talabarterías*. One such *talabartería* is called Cardón (refers to the big cactuses one will find in many places throughout the country, particularly in the northwest. The label on the clothing is also in the shape of a cactus), and they have several branches in and around the city. Close to where Mariás’s parents live, there is a branch of Cardón. It is situated within a huge entertainment park of cinemas, restaurants, furniture shops, cafes, different boutiques and bars. This place caters to the thousands of people who live in the *barrio privados* and *countries* in that area. The objects on offer in the *talabartería* are heavily infused with a symbolism of the *campo* (here: countryside, can also mean field or land property). Many garments and accessories are in fact that which is worn by the *gaucho*, the almost mythic land worker, which thanks to nationalistic lyricism is often imagined mounted on a horse with whom he shares an organic unity with the telluric forces of the land he roams (DeLaney, 1996).

Argentina has enough of published pictorial art and televised folkloric festivals for the average urban citizen to know what a *gaucho* supposedly looks like (even though these present the ideal type and romanticised version of this personage), and furthermore, what are the garments and accessories that make up a daily set of clothing or a costume generally associated with the people of the countryside. There are a great number of stores in and around Buenos Aires where these items might be purchased, however, they are expensive in comparison to most contemporary fashion. There is a wide range of items in these stores, and they make up a synthesis of nostalgia, myth and cultural hybridity.

Take Cardón. Here there are a number of bags, or purses, in almost all sizes for women, all made of leather. For men or the family as a whole, luggage sets also made in leather with suede trimmings and patches, in sombre and organic colours such as brown or dark green. There is headwear; either broad brimmed hats with chin strings, or Basque caps and sixpence hats in checked tweed or plain cashmere. Pants and trousers will include jeans, corduroy or *bombachas de gaucho* (characteristic pants with buttons fitted at the open ankles) in canvas fabric. There are checked shirts in thick, combed cotton, and the classic oxford pinpoint in different colours. As for footwear, one will find *alpargatas* (worn both in- and outdoors, a very light, heel capped slipper typical of the gaucho image), elaborately made in suede, boots in different shapes, moccasins, brogue shoes and riding

boots. Complementing the latter, there are saddles for horses, and most of what one would need to play some chukkers of polo (sticks, balls, shirts, riding pants, helmets and gloves), except for the horses themselves of course. In coats and jackets, the classic oilskin Endurance, in either green or blue, is ubiquitous, as well as casual coats in leather, suede, plain cotton and corduroy. As a subtitle to Cardón reads '*cosas nuestras*'. This phrase, meaning *our things*, can of course be read in two ways. It refers to the product range of the store, and, to the items being Argentinean in make and symbolism.

By ways of inferring and abstracting

Implication by simplicity

I propose one might conceive of what takes place inside the polo outlet as scavenging. The articles on offer are collected from various sales points as new ranges and parties replace old ones, or they are brought in illegitimately through customs, most likely from places like Miami. Then they are allocated in ad-hoc locations and sold at cut price. What I address is the issue of why they are so sought after and craved. What we are considering here is simply not items and objects of a certain brand, but a whole range of brands, and furthermore, commodities that serve as props, components or details of the stylisation of life. The meaning of these props is communicated in their use, for everyone to see and perceive, and their consumption and display. Lifestyles are constructed and designed by means of various elements; commodities, habits and experiences. It involves time spent doing certain things, and money invested in acquiring certain things. These props evoke in their display an imagination in their beholder regarding the lifestyle of the bearer. It is a non-verbal but clearly articulated communication in which props, or signs, by virtue of what meaning is placed on them by the beholder, become symbols of an imagined lifestyle. For the sign to have its desired effect, it is of course contingent upon the understanding and deciphering by the beholder corresponding with what the bearer wants to communicate; there must be a census on the symbols. One aspect certainly communicated, is the acquisitive power enabling the lifestyle to which a single thing like some stitches on a shirt might testify. That labels are conducive to imagined lifestyles is hardly a revolutionary admission. Certain brands are easily recognisable, though, by virtue of the efficacy of their design. One such is Polo. There are more expensive brands around and although the quality might be unquestionable, it is surely not unique in this respect either. Nevertheless, this

brand has become emblematic for large porteño segment, there among many *profesionales*. Brands less accessible, like Armani, Versace and so on, do not carry an equally distinguishable label. The Polo label communicates poignantly, uncomplicatedly and powerfully in its succinct simplicity. I suggest that it is this combination of conventional, not-rocking-the-boat cut of the clothing, and yet the seal of exclusivity that makes the brand so popular with the aesthetically moderate but mimetically prone porteños of the (upper) middle classes. Polo is firmly cemented in the porteño imagery as a symbol of a widely coveted lifestyle, because if you have a Polo shirt, odds are that you have a comfortable or even lavish lifestyle, even though more and more porteños know that this is not necessarily so.

Conspicuous consumption and inconspicuous acquisition

Inside the outlet, a scrappy place by any standards, there is a clandestine hunt for and acquiring of garments, but more importantly, and that of bearing social meaning: signs. No one knows each other, and no one talks to each other. It is an intensified accumulation within this illegitimate market of symbolic goods. Illegitimate, because what these goods in their possession is designed to symbolise, is the lifestyle that means solvency for *conspicuous acquisition*; indulging unfazed and unaffected in the lavish and original Polo sales points like the exquisite boutiques in *Unicenter*, Recoleta and *Gallería Pacífico*. The people inside will never see each other again. Association with the clandestine brotherhood of buying knockoffs to appear wealthy will not haunt them afterwards. Clearly conspicuous if observed inside, this nevertheless remains an inconspicuous acquisition of goods that will communicate falsely in the ensuing conspicuous consumption. The imagery evoked by the sign is that of a lifestyle speaking economical success, as such conducive to power and lush life, something that is coveted in most parts of the world provided there is a consensus of the meaning of success. What the imagery does not take into account, a calculation done by the scavengers, is the circumstances of the acquisition of the symbol being that which they actually were.

We should also address the issue that most of the people inside the outlet were probably *profesionales*, given their appearance and the time of day. We have few if any reasons to assume that articles associated with the good life, not to be confused with the glamorous life, are not also coveted by this group. In fact, most of the people associated with the retreated lifestyle and the stylistic expressions it carries are in fact *profesionales* (Svampa, 2001). As one of the groups who

benefited most under the neoliberal restructuring (Guano, 2002), they are certainly living more comfortably than most others, and they do afford many of the elements associated with the successful lifestyle. It might seem far-fetched, but as we have seen in narratives and accounts from informants within this group, an aspect hard to ignore about the accumulation and managing of status-infused symbols, is that of prudence. Prudence means calculations and planning, and in many cases this translates to utilitarian evaluations such as the pecuniary strategy of purchasing things on offer, either at the end of a season or in a total liquidation sale. Looking for the best deal of a certain good or make is a time-honoured and widely practiced custom among informants. Not all of them, but many *profesionales* will buy Polo; it's *cheto*, it's nice and at least it used to be reasonable accessible (before the devaluation offset an inflation to which clothes were not exempt). They will not make a habit of it. They will only wear it occasionally, *and only when going out*. They will certainly not buy the more expensive items in the special boutiques, even though many of them could. Spending that much money on one item is an act of irresponsibility, something that is unnecessary and an act of decadent extravagance. Central to this discourse is the disassociation with and the repudiation of what is perceived as the unviable spending spree of the other middle class segments and the corrupting hedonism of the *farandula* and their *cholulo* adherents.

Refinement and respectability in a cosmopolitan experience

Zara is not about the brand in the sense of clearly communicating a sign. But does Zara speak lesser volumes about the imagination of a lifestyle? For many porteños knowing about this brand in Europe, knowing that the lines on offer are the same as in London and Paris, and that the stores are organised and designed in the same manner providing the same experiential aspect to the browsing and deliberation, these places are ideologically located on similar ground. As such, more so than the imagining of being somewhere else, contemporary Europe is taking place in Buenos Aires, defining the porteño cosmopolitan experience.

We are working under the theoretical premises that displays at points-of-sale are loci wherein local categories meet with commoditized cultural flows. When July and Maria go to Zara, they largely encounter an aesthetic to which they respond positively. They will buy this clothing because of this judgment, and because they find it reasonably accessible. The line is perceived as very *fina*. With reference to an aesthetic, *fino* or *fina* is something elegant but not overly elaborate, something delicate but not too impractical for normal use. As such, in this context it refers to an expression of a

particular feminine aesthetic. This feminine expression is clearly articulated and might be identified as hegemonic within the wider social segment with which, by imagination, the young women identify. I elaborated on presenting an image of this aesthetic, by describing the cuts and shapes of the garment that predominantly goes into this style. In its stark opposition to the *llamativo*, it finds its own moral support and legitimacy. The *llamativo* is invariably carrying negatively charged connotations; it can be *grasa*, like the shiny, glossy and indiscrete, or, sluttish and overly suggestive, as associated with the image of the *gatos* (more or less professional female companions, either escorts or women simply living off men as mistresses or girlfriends), and hence infused with promiscuity. Of course, in being *grasa* it is deemed lacking in culture, in being promiscuous it is explicitly morally compromising. If there is a category encapsulating cultured and refined in a stylistic expression, it is *fina* - and the young women find this elegant, but decent and morally commendable expression of contemporary Europe, in Zara. As such indulging in this line provides a practical locus wherein the management of respectability as determined by class morals is harmonious and concomitant with a cosmopolitan experience.

Cosmopolitan allowances for classificatory discomfort

If most of the display represents a haven of soothing impressions, easy on the senses and indeed gratifyingly recognisable, there is some classificatory discomfort to be tackled in the men's department. The objects of rejection, though, are exempt of the categories that would have seemed plausible. *Grasa* does not apply inside Zara. Objects originate and represent places located outside the imagined scope within where certain categories have legitimacy in a system of classification. The stylistic content of the cosmopolitan experience precludes certain derogatory categorisations, as such eluding local discourses of class and taste. This suggests the ambiguity and flexibility with which these categories are deployed, and that they are remarkably "dexterous" in moments of ambivalence.

Often, other terms will be used to disassociate undermining elements of an overarching affinity from compromising conceptualisation. *Mamarracho* (actually meaning gaudy or grotesque) is such an example. In capturing the non-matching, *but seeing it as an entity*, it ascertains the hybridity of a phenomenon, a stylistic expression, a performance, an ensemble, etc. There are numerous ways to conceptualise a hybrid (see Archetti, 1999), but I suggest that a characteristic thing about it is its novelty - unfamiliarity in its ambiguity. In becoming norm, the hybrid is not thought of as such. The

only reason “some things match“, is their practical and convenient perpetuation by reproduced convention. Is there a natural reason why brogues are more appropriately worn with a three-piece woollen suit than are sneakers? To a taste that responds positively to the aesthetic expressed by the suit and the brogues as *fino*, the image of the hybrid style is disturbing. It breaks a mould, and does not allow itself to be pegged. It exhausts the existing categories denoting defined styles, however, the *locus determines what socially connotative categories are appropriately assigned in characterising it*. *Mamarracho*, as chosen by July, does not carry a linkage to socially stigmatised practices. To her, it denotes something aesthetically foul that does not match.

However, by further inspection, and an inconceivably fast process of association, July pegs the troublesome ensemble to the image of the *machopostmo*. This category refers linguistically to post-modern men, a new kind of masculine ideal supposedly brought about by the processes of modernity, and practices, preferences and orientations associated with him. It is a symbol of polycultural affinities and distorted social forms. It is a breach with conventions and traditional trajectories and undertaken responsibilities embodied in and perceived in the practices of newer generations, notably young men. Beatriz, July's mother gives her take on the *machopostmo*.

"The *machopostmo* is like many *jovenes*, or young men of today. They live comfortably... well they arrange their lives that way. Many of them remain kids until they are 40. They roam around with no plan, no vision, seeking out different environments, not knowing what they are looking for. They don't devote themselves to anything, or anyone for that matter. The point is that they don't assume responsibility, and they are unwilling to face the prospects of having to provide for others. It's not normal, just loafing around without any vocation. You can see it in his contact with women as well - no interest. It's like, 'don't touch me, please'... What is that? That's not a man. This comes from a lack of love, I am sure. These men came from homes where mothers worked outside the home, and they have missed out on *cariño* (affection). That's why they are seeking so much, calling for attention in this alternative style of living and behaving. But really, they are just acting like children, not like men. They are inconsistent, and very immature. And this thing with not *dedicarse* (dedicate or devote oneself) to anything, that's just being *vago* (lazy). The *machopostmo* is from the middle classes or further up, but he doesn't like to make an effort. He doesn't like to study, either. Sure, he'll spend hours playing the guitar, or sitting in front of the computer. What good does that do? '*Me gusta tocar la guitarra...*' (I like to play the guitar) please... *vagos*. If they do find something to do, it's typically something that's really a load of crock, chefs, for example. *Qué chefs?! Vagos!* Yes, I know, I know, there is a tradition for this in Europe, but all these young guys wanting to be chefs? They are just *boludiando*, because they are *vagos* and don't like to study. It has nothing to do with that school, what's it called.... yes, Cordon Bleu. They sit around fiddling with guitars, they never go to the conservatory, or they study many of these quasi careers that have popped up the last few years, most of which has to do with *computación*."

But what about his female counterpart?

"Well, the *mujer postmo* is the woman who works, takes charge of the finances, organises, plans, puts into place, calculates, brings and fetches; she does everything. She doesn't want to stay home, she wants to work in a company, and live more or less the same life as the man. And she says she wants to be free. But I don't understand. What has that got to do with freedom? Things are changing, you know, many women don't want the same things as before... I am talking about middle class women. Like July, I guess, she's like that. She wants to do everything. But I don't see how that is going to make her liberated in any way, all these things that she feels that she has to do... Of course, there are many self-sacrificing women, especially in the lower classes, but I never felt *abnegada*. Why should I? I am living the life I have chosen.

Beatriz first heard this term listening to her favourite radio program. She often refers to reflections and daily life observations of these *locutores* (hosts). She emphasises their level of *cultura*; in speech, formulation and knowledge, that "makes them very rewarding to listen to, but probably not accessible to everyone." Similarly, she has her favourites in the writing press and TV journalism, the words of whom upon which she will place importance, by virtue of the unquestionable *cultura* of their speakers. The process by which Beatriz internalises the idea of the *machopostmo* and fixes it on images and impressions sampled but still unstructured, is recognised as appropriating categories invented by a group of critics or commentators mandated by the social group as intermediaries of cultural trends (Bourdieu, 1984). Her daughter in turn appropriates this category encapsulating the fluidity of new forms, expressions and aesthetics, in the process of attributing meaning to impressions that momentarily defy classification.

As for the suit and the sneakers, a new, unstructured impression, it passes from being aesthetically *mamarracho*, to something of the *machopostmo*; a stylistic expression associated with this troublesome newness embodied and represented by young urbanites with alternative lifestyles. A style can be associated with moral values, as seen with the dichotomy of the decency imbued *finca* and the promiscuously *llamativa*. The cognitive proximity is closer between certain aesthetics and moral associations than in other cases. Cultural familiarity rapidly evokes associations with an object or form. The ambiguous or unfamiliar relies on a more circumstantial train of thought to arrive at an imagery which the object or form might symbolise. For someone like Beatriz, this imagery might be any or all of the elements referred to in her account. Based on it, we can discern that a phenomenon, object or practice, associated with the *machopostmo*, is ultimately not morally

commendable, as it breaches with social conventions that to Beatriz have their legitimacy in various moralities. July does not respond with gratification to the aesthetic, but she might find its meaning and symbolism by extended association, and judge it morally based on what the imagery evokes in the mediating category.

Illegitimate privilege revisited

Allowing for Europe to take place in Buenos Aires means allowing for what it brings along of troublesome novelties. The flexibility of the categories is demonstrated in beholding an aspect of something with which you have a greater affinity, and with which you identify. This also relates to disassociation and antagonism. We see this in the example of the Latin Americans lambasted for their attitude. July, like most other *profesionales* I know, rarely travel around in various countries in Latin America. There is a profound sense of indignation in the young women's reaction to the presence of Latin American tourists cruising the fashionable shopping avenues buying wholesale many articles recently made inaccessible to most Argentinians. We can elicit the foundations for this indignation with how they perceive these unwelcome tourists. There is something fundamentally provoking to her in individuals and groups perceived of as having severe deficiency in cultural capital having substantial acquisitive power. The presence of the Colombians indulging in what has become an illusion for many porteños is a provocation, and an act of "rubbing it in", regarding the malaise of the country. The issue of socio-economic standing and cultural level offsets a familiar argument. The logic applies within her own society, as seen in what is regarded the ill-founded economic solvency of the *comerciantes* and public administration workers, and it finds its parallel on another level, where national sentiment is at the core of the insult, making the uneducated and vulgar Colombians the perpetrators.

The agency of distinction in local imageries

Polo, like other foreign brands, have existed for quite some time in the porteño fashionscape, but is given renewed potency as the most efficacious symbol of the privileged and coveted lifestyle. Of course, not all *profesionales* indulge in all of this, but they do at least enjoy the offer. Zara figures prominently in the image of porteño cosmopolitanism. It is interesting, though, that an aesthetic considered among the most *cheto* by many porteño *profesionales*, is not only local, but exclusively

rural.

Informants, like many porteños will often wear items typical of the *talabartería*; bags, bracelets, key rings or silk scarves. As such, they are more than anything accessorising. It is an understated affinity with a traditional aesthetic. *Gauchos* are not part of the porteño experience, nor do porteños dress as *gauchos*. The accessories have been smartened up and elaborated to grace porteño wrists, necks and waists. This appropriation of symbols of the *campo* is practiced mainly among higher social strata, and it has come to be recognised as such, as seeing them displayed evoked the imagery of San Isidro families.

The Cardón range offers spectacles that produce visual narratives of three cultures. There is the pre-immigrant imagery of the romanticised *gaucho*, a personage made mythical in nationalistic literature as living humbly and honestly in unity with beast and nature; there is the English gentry and industrial bourgeoisie, the landowning classes, and the elite pastime of polo. Considering *the location* of these stores and *the prices* of the product range, *nuestra* as such, becomes a pronoun of property and belonging that applies to certain parts of the population - upper middle classes and beyond.

Polo has a strong tradition in Argentina. It was brought here by English immigrants in the latter part of the 1800's, people with knowledge and the means to practice the sport; requirements such as experience, fields and horses. It gained popularity in Argentina, particularly after the merits of the national team in competition with foreign clubs. Argentina cultivated an efficient hybrid, in merging the old horsemanship of the *gaucho* culture with this new import. For the better part of the 20th century, Argentina has been internationally renowned for being the world's superior nation of polo. Players have been exported through the decades, playing professionally in foreign leagues. Argentineans know they are held to be the best polo nation in the world, and the people I talk to *do* take apparent pride in that, although their relationship to the sport is most peripheral, as it remains an elite pastime. Informants point out that it requires a lot of resources to practice the sport, and that the tickets to see the matches are very expensive.

There are special publications on polo in Argentina; glossy magazines in high quality paper, filled with news on the sports circuit, features on games, picture montages from parties, in between seductive commercials for luxury hotels, expensive cars, designer wear and restaurants with high celebrity profile. Many of my informants will tell you that the polo spectacle, the people that go to the fields and follow the sport, are a mix of passionate followers and *cholulos*. The best players are nothing short of icons, enjoying a high profile celebrity status. The first time I came across the most

exclusive polo publication, was while waiting in a seating area in the offices of a *porteño* travel agency. Clearly, there is an association and affiliation of polo with a range of other objects and experiential commodities. It is a symbol embedded in a imagery of a lifestyle that is largely inaccessible but for a very limited social segment.

Being a nation based on colonialism and immigration, Argentina forged a hybrid culture (Rock, 1985; Shumway, 1991 and García Ganclini, 1995). Symbols of a pre-immigrant culture merged with cultural imports of the immigrants and formed new national symbols (Archetti, 1999). This immigration was culturally heterogeneous. The imagery of the polo is inextricably linked to an English heritage in Argentina. Even though polo never became popular, the English heritage has nevertheless transcended into social life on various other arenas. Many of its cultural insertions remained outside and ran parallel to the Argentina founded on other immigrant sources, like educational institutions, social clubs, daily news publications and so on. On the other hand, another English import is today the most popular and celebrated practice in Argentina, namely football. The Falklands War notwithstanding, the Argentineans have traditionally had a much closer affinity with the British than with its Northern American neighbours.⁽⁷¹⁾

Local conceptions about British or *English* culture, a distinction that is hardly ever made, form a mythical imagery of the English aristocracy, upper classes or the idealised country village with the obligatory adherent local manor. The perpetuation of these popularised images is done through the maintenance of the myth, in the construction of a certain English symbolism through these institutions (educational, social and stylistic) referred to above; exclusive English clubs and societies for expatriates, prestigious colleges teaching in English and bearing English names like St George's and St Catherine's (with a student body made up by children and teenagers from the upper, and upper middle classes), and boutiques (most definitely on the pricey side) offering a range of "classic English fashion" (tweed blazers, checked cotton shirts, corduroy trousers, oilskin jackets, lambs wool v-neck sweaters etc).

English cultural heritage in this country is not associated with poverty and struggle, rather one of landownership, industrial enterprise, time-honoured civilised social traditions and educational excellence. In contrast to the daily struggle often typifying the narrated lives of the urban immigrants of mainly Italian origin, wherein is nascent the morally reprehensible practices of the *chanta* and the *vivo*. Not being a predominant urban demographic, relatively few in numbers and decisively self-secluded, the heritage of the British today, is largely reflected in cultural institutions and certain

segments of the populations. The political institutions and organisation, along with traditional economic policies and structures, in short, the objective structures that represent all its woes, are not imbued with the image of the English cultural heritage, neither in structure nor symbolism.

This tripartite symbolism of the gauchesque, the English and the local elite, is what is represented among the shelves at Cardón, tacitly defined and articulated in the fusion and juxtaposition in the window displays; a mannequin wearing polo equipment from top to toe, and another, although smartened up, typical *gaucho* clothing. To my informants, based on distant romance with the symbolism of the life imagined as that of *campo*, the items on offer are *real* and have an *honest* quality to them, in the leather and the cotton, as opposed to a vulgar glitzy design and cheap synthetic materials. The presentation is at the same time modest and limited - exclusive in its simplicity. The *mate* cup (elsewhere a symbol of lower middle class or working class *grasada* as seen in the parks), daggers and silverware, broaches and so forth, juxtaposed to the lavishly made polo equipment or luggage sets, blend in seemingly unobjectionably in the mind of my informants, and present themselves as complementary rather than socially contesting and contrasting items. The *talabartería* reflects old transnationality and cultural fusion. It is the traditional and wholesome made *cheto*, and desirable, in its catering to an economically powerful social segment. In its final paradox, the aesthetised values of the *gaucho* life and the English endeavour is physically located inside what is a typical feature of the Americanised culture of consumption; the socially segregating and money generating entertainment park.

6

Social displays and the language of class; contextualising the morality of social categories

If, as I have suggested, taste is associated with the perceived and imagined lifestyle of social segments and groupings, and as such represents something desirable or offensive, something with which one wants to identify or to which aspire, or something one chooses not to appropriate or deliberately avoids, then I feel compelled to investigate what these perceptions and imageries are; just how are these lifestyles judged and constituted in language, i.e., discourse? Some lifestyles constitute the benchmark for appropriate preferences and practices, and conversely, some come to constitute an imagery of all things vial and degenerate?

Locating morality

First a word on morality. Both for reasons of space and purpose, I will dispense with a general philosophical discussion of morality, and briefly outline in what way this concept relates to the matter at hand. Various scholars have examined what we can consider numerous and different moralities in their ethnographic studies; moralities of reputation, respectability, justice, loyalty etc, and they have thematically been linked to studies such as shame and honour (Peristiany, 1967 and Melhuus, 1997), gender differences in assessment of the good life (Wilson, 1978), ethnicity (Lien, 1991) and so forth. This approach has been taken to illustrate conflicting value systems characteristic of social hierarchies or classes (Howell, 1997). We should be careful conceptualising these moral universes as demarcated, stable and autonomously regimented value systems operating discretely within a segment of any society.

There exist several perspectives on morality which inextricably links it to the act. The morality, a set of understandings of what one ought and ought not do pertaining to that particular context or institution, finds its expression in it being acted out. This has urged scholars to argue that moralities must be analysed on certain arenas, in certain situations and contexts where they can be observed or analysed through actions or narratives (Archetti, 1999). Indeed, moralities come into interaction as individuals move across and back and forth over social scapes, and in placing meaning on situations

and phenomena, moralities are contextually negotiated (see scholars such as Garfinkel, 1967 as referred to in Wolfe, 1989). Howell seems to agree with this, but she also puts emphasis on agents having to be in some way shaped or informed prior to the acts or moments of interaction (Howell, 1997). In analysing morality, we make an error in going about it normatively. What is paramount though, is objectively considering its normative aspect. What does seem to remain an unavoidable aspect of morality, is that of normative reflection; whether constantly at work (Johnson, 1993), or in times of significant revolts or personal ritual passages (Turner, 1969).

I will not explicitly say that altruism, solidarity or care are moral acts, although they might very well be deemed as such within a number of socio-cultural settings. Then again, it would depend on the situation; i.e. showing solidarity with everyone would quickly become morally illegitimate in most societies. A zealot might be a morally salient figure inside his community, outside it, he could be a potentially dangerous fanatic. Furthermore, he would not be regarded as moral in terms of zealous for a profound interest and assiduous devotion to an issue outside the scope of the interest of the community. In other words, the contextualisation of virtues and the recognition of this is crucial.

For our purposes, I will proceed with the appreciation that the only thing that holds universality regarding morality, regardless of culture, context, convention and choice - nomothetically versus idiographically, collectively versus individually - is a sense of *ought* and *ought not*. It is the limited purpose of this text to investigate how, and in what way, a notion of contextually relevant, complementary and intersecting moralities inherent to social discourse as familiarised and performed by informants, have a bearing on social classification and practices.

Class as social practice and display

Clase trabajadora, indigentes, pobres and so on all refer to various levels of the lower classes in porteno classification, based on an idea of objective standard of living. However, what deserves our attention, are the categories inherent in the discourse of class as associated with and determined by social practice. Social classes are implied, or conceptualised by extension of classification of observations of social actions. These actions are judged normatively as they are encapsulated by categories imbued with moral connotations. Class, as such, is an abstraction of social action and practice - lifestyle - and so style and taste, are ultimately associated with these actions and practices, again, mediated by the deployment of categories.

Imagined practices constituted in discourse

Dora, is educated in *letras* (linguistics and literature) from university, but quit her teaching job after her husband started making a stable and good income. She married her husband Carlos when they were in their mid-twenties, and they had Maria after a couple of years. She claims that had she had more children, they would not have received proper attention, as one was enough. Had she reconsidered it, it would have been too late anyway, she told me. Dora has one brother, as does her husband, but neither she nor her husband have much contact with their siblings. Both Dora and Carlos come from middle class families that two generations before them were immigrant workers. Dora's father, a construction foreman, insistently encouraged his children to take higher education, and Dora frequently refers to her late father's many mantras in life, in particular that of the importance of education. Carlos undertook his studies later into adulthood, as economical instability and devaluation had a disastrous effect on his entrepreneurial activities and thus saw the family experiencing some severely lean years. Slowly they rebuilt their existence. Now, Carlos spends every working day at the plant of Caldini, sometimes taking time to visit other clients in the province. He is on average away 9-10 hours from Monday to Friday, and spends another hour or so every night including Sunday working at home with his portfolio. Dora's days are characterised by rigid routine, something she gladly admits to. It is impossible to fail to notice the pride with which she keeps her house virtually spotless; cleaning, vacuuming, dusting etc; washing and ironing the clothes of her family, included that of the researcher, and feeding everyone all their meals from morning to evening. She manages to occupy herself the entire day with the daily maintenance of her two-storey English style brick house, the laundry, cooking, her front garden and her back yard, including incidental shopping at the nearest mall (bigger buys are done once a week together with Carlos) and occasional trips to the bank to sort out the bills.

We sat down by the dining room table one afternoon after lunch, enjoying a coffee. (72) She had received a phone call earlier that day from an old friend from the *country* where they used to live. The only contact now was limited to calls, and they were becoming rare. Dora and Maria discussed the latest developments in the life of the son of the friend. The young man approaching 30, an engineer, had moved in together with his girlfriend, apparently a lower class girl from another South American country. Dora's friend, unable to influence the proceedings in any way, had characterised the actions of her son as *cosa de negro* (that of the *negro*). Dora and Maria concurred. It was typical *cosa de negro*, and they could not grasp what had led the young man to do this. It was beyond

reason. I wanted to know how his actions were deemed as such.

“She said: ‘that’s *cosa de negro*’. And personally I think she was right, especially with regards to the habit of living together with a lot of people, one after the other ... it all has to do with this refusal of commitment, and it’s evident in many forms, in work as well as family. It’s like they don’t place any value on commitment, it’s this attitude of ‘what do I care?’ This is typical of the ‘*hijo del pais*’ (son of the country), *el criollo*, he was always like that. He never wants to progress... that’s a typical thing of the *negro*, always throwing away the little money he has..., always spending, never looking ahead. Of course you can never progress that way, but I suppose it is never in his interest. You see, there is a complete lack of interest in *mejorarse* (improve oneself). They simply don’t want to improve. The immigrant, you know, he brought different values, he *did* have ideas of how to get up and beyond, how to progress. Of course you have heard the refrain ‘*mi hijo el doctor*’ (‘my son the doctor’, a famous play), it really sums up the immigrant dreams and lives - the dream of the first generation to have their kids succeed, to have education and good jobs, and naturally as the title of the play goes, to have a title, no? But the *negro* doesn’t progress.”

But is there any way for the people, who are born into poverty, to realistically have another life?

“No, of course not... when parents are *negros*, the kids will be the same. But it’s like... people don’t understand. We have to educate these people - like my father always said, he was insistent on the matter of education. Ignorance breeds ignorance, and it goes hand in hand with poverty. Of course, we have a responsibility, but they are growing in numbers everyday. Sometimes I think the only way is to *bajarlos* (put them down), you know, they are left with no place in this society. And their reproduction is completely uncontrolled, hordes of children, all born into the same misery, with what prospects? How on earth can you provide well for your family when you have something like 10 children - and parents roaming about with new partners, copulating with whomever? Of course, not everyone goes into the same bag, but you know this is a problem. I don’t understand... these are the things that supposedly should separate us from animals. It’s like the *negro* acts like an animal with his partner. To tell you the truth, I honestly don’t know if he ever falls in love, or if he’s able to... it seems like something entirely physical. Love you know...it’s a sentiment that has to do with some kind of evolution, right? It’s a superior feeling. I know, I know, my theories are somewhat *sui generis* (apologetic smile). But it’s logical! If you want to take care of another, you have to give her a good life. But there are fundamental predicaments to the existence of the *negro*... women are suppressed and selfless, and they live in a part of society that is very *machista*. And as long as they don’t have access to education, what can you expect? We have created a country of beggars, and it all started with Peron. He was dependant on the masses, and he made them dependant on him. It was made easier to ask for things, instead of working and improving yourself. This *facilismo* (things made easy) is the curse of the country; the asking, the begging, always looking to receive without any effort.”

As probably the most candid of my informants, I often know when some things are said in a heated state, or said tongue-in-cheek. However, I have encountered similar views various times. Dora

asserts the link between the *negro* and the darker-skinned *criollo*, associating these social practices with the poorest segment of the population. In first explaining this demise of poverty and vial living conditions, Dora finds reason for this in the *negro* contrasting what she refers to as self-improvement, a morality placing value on personal effort, industriousness and above all *aspiration*. The aspiration is justified by the logic making it the prerequisite for a trajectory deemed morally sound and viable.

There is also a sense of ‘every man the maker of his own fortune’ in this morality. As suggested by Wolfe (1989), and relating to immigrant narratives, the absence of a strong state regulating and at the same time providing a social security in turn generating a solidarity (with distant others, or perfect strangers) (73), the individual agency that may have started as a strategy of survival in face of economic hardship, has turned into a moral discourse emphasising the virtuousness of this private endeavour. From this perspective, there is constructed a causality between no education, title or job, and laziness, idleness and self-destructive lack of aspiration.

Dora recognises the problem of social reproduction and the destiny of the *negro* as located in between the morality of individual industriousness and the morality of solidarity and responsibility. Children’s innocence will inevitably be lost in the calamitous cross-section of the ineptness of the inefficient and corrupt state and the ignorance of the uneducated and promiscuous parents. The morality of responsibility lends its arguments to the rhetoric of individual and public accountability in the matter of the fate of the unborn, but the issue of the reproduction is also constructed by the interwoven principles of a morality of respectability - as seen in lamenting the promiscuity she sees as underpinning the living arrangements and sexual practices she associates with the *negro*.

Commitment is a recurring theme. This factor is referred to by informants as the premise for their lifestyle and position in the social structure. Long term educational investments, saving plans, prudence, looking for bargains instead of shopping at whim, practicing birth control, the institution of marriage etc - calculations as oppose to impulse and spontaneity - the sum of which to Dora contrasts the practices of the *negro*, and underlines everything she believes in.

Distinguishing displays of discontent by the morality of class

The *profesional* discourse of class, armed with categories of moral connotations, asserts social situations and constitutes observed practices in language “as they really are“ (see Jenkins on Bourdieu, 2000). Practices and actions are associated with class by virtue of how expectations and

preconceptions about social segments answer to impressions, and class is referred to by moral categories contingent upon the actual display observed.

In December 2001, Buenos Aires erupted in a series of demonstrations and violent uprisings. Social and political unrest had been building up over the 4 year long economical recession characterised mainly by the spiralling of an already crippling foreign debt, public deficits prompting cuts in state sector salaries and rising unemployment. The series of event was initially offset by the implementation of the *corralito* (little corral)- the mentioned banking curb restrictions. Word spread quickly throughout the city that cash point machines were being drained, and that accounts were frozen until further notice. As most historical and press related observers would have it, this was the first time middle classes were in the streets by the tens of thousands in outright protest. Honking the horns of their cars, banging pots and pans became the mode of letting their discontent be known.⁽⁷⁴⁾ The spontaneous demonstration continued throughout the entire night, and was repeated several times over the course of the next few weeks, with marches throughout the city being arranged. *Profesionales* informants watching the proceedings on TV in their homes voiced their support for the protesters, acknowledging their legitimate reason for complaining, and importantly, their way of doing it.

However, the casserole demonstrations were soon overshadowed by another more sinister series of events that were taking place at the same time. Shortly after the thousands of pot banging protesters had invaded the governmental quarters of the downtown area, looters started emptying out supermarkets and stores, and vandalism escalated beyond control throughout the city and across the province. A ubiquitous target, McDonalds restaurants were the first to suffer, followed by foreign banks, and ultimately any institution or house of pecuniary or corporate financial connotation. What had started as peaceful although heated mass demonstration, had turned into a rupture where telling one action from the other was difficult; pot bangers, violent political activists, looters and robbers were all part of a state of confusion broadcasted in often unclear images by the media to porteño homes. The version that quickly established itself among *profesional* informants, however, was impossible to misinterpret; what had started as legitimate discontent addressed in an acceptable fashion by the middle classes, had of course opened up for the unacceptable actions whereby others, chiefly lower class, had taken advantage of the uncontrolled situation where havoc momentarily prevailed. The notion of *negros* would rapidly enter the discourse.

One afternoon a couple of days after the most violent episodes had taken place, I was enjoying a

lager in a Kilkenny pub in the company of Simon and a few of his colleges. Mainly *licenciados* in political science or lawyers, they all work in parts of the public administration. As the news flashed over the TV screen inside the pub, we watched the latest development of the uprising. The news showed footage of a storekeeper breaking down in tears over having his stock looted by masses of people. Everyone knew he would most likely never have it recovered or reimbursed. Simon and the others promptly gave their take on the incident.

“That’s not hunger... don’t tell me that is hunger!!! That is the work of masses of fucking *negros*... come and get it while you can, while no one can stop you. No regard for the hard working people who live off their small convenient stores or small supermarkets. There is no respect neither for private property nor the law. Look at that guy, there! Running away with a washing machine on his back! What is that? Is that hunger? Is that a necessity? No my friend, this is resentment, this a way of saying ‘I am in title to have everything that you have, therefore I’ll just step up and take it, and there is nothing you can do to stop me’.”

After these incidents around New Year 2002, there was also an escalation and intensifying of demonstration in the form of road blockings, carried out by what are referred to as *piqueteros*, a phrase coined from the English pickets. There prevails a degree of uncertainty as to who these *piqueteros* really are and how they are recruited by organisers. Sometimes they number by the hundreds, other times only a handful, and the efficacy of their demonstration vary accordingly. They sometimes manage to cut off major roads and junctions paralysing parts of the traffic leading in and out of the city, much to the despair to *profesionales* commuters. In recent months, *piqueteros* have staged roadblocks on average twice every month in and around the city.

The irritation and exasperation this practice causes, also has made the category of the *negro* surface in *profesional* discourse on the phenomenon of the *piqueteros*. Different theories are in abundance, although themed similarly around a few focal points. There remains little doubt that the organisers of these roadblocks are different factions of various labour unions. They demonstrate under the parole of worker’s rights, just wages and improved social conditions. *Profesionales* find it suspicious that the workers themselves never seem to be interviewed in connection with these events, and the fact that most *piqueteros* cover their faces with shawls is also casting into doubt the motives and reasons for these actions, giving rise to theories that these are “hired protesters“, recruited in the *villas miserias*. Again finding myself in the company of Simon and some of his usual colleagues turned happy hour companions, I sampled their observations while watching the TV coverage of a

large scale roadblock:

“That motley crew in the background with half masked faces holding banners and torches, don’t tell me those are the workers they are representing. They are most likely *villeros* (shantytown residents) or other layabouts who are looking to make a quick buck or two. This happens all the time. Corporate forces recruit them just to form a mass, and they make them dependant by paying them a little bit by joining in asking for more.”

“That’s right, it’s all about asking... that’s the easiest way. Look, these *negros* don’t even know what they are protesting. The unions have some of their people in the crowds who do the talking, and then maybe there are some *leftista* (leftist or progressive) student guy who talks on behalf of them, even though no one there really understands what he is talking about. Get it?”

“It’s pretty damn obvious that this country is never going to progress with more and more people like that, isn’t it? But unions just as political rulers, coerce these people into a relationship of dependency that suits both perfectly. They get the mass support that they need, and the *negro vago* (lazy) can keep on receiving.”

The categorisation of *negro*, and *negro* practices, presents itself as fixing social meaning on a set of actions and displays that in various but clear ways offend and contrast the upper middle classes as represented by *profesionales*. It appears that the clear antagonism on the part of the latter towards these displays associated with lower classes, finds its basis in perceiving them as subversive; they undermine an established order that undeniably suits the *professional* segment well. *Profesionales* are not directly threatened by the poor, rather the conditions of social unrest brought about by the imagery of their actions; vandalism, looting, assaults and kidnappings. An increase of these phenomena is synonymous with an erosion of stability and conventions of organised forms; the sanctity of the nuclear family, the authority of formal education, the civility of social etiquette and the inviolability of judicial institutions.⁽⁷⁵⁾

Profesionales will readily admit to the shortcomings of the state, about the severely inept and corrupt administration, however, the *raison d’être* of the social hierarchy is not questioned, neither in public nor class located discourse. The hegemony of the structure is *the premise for discourse, an indisputable fact*, and a matrix informing debates arising from series of events such as demonstrations, lootings and road blocking pickets.

We can see the *cosa de negro* as contextual social practice that threatens to, if left to blossom, disturb or undermine a stability on which segments like *profesionales* construct their lives and articulate their normative conventions. An argument of the nation’s progress is purposefully pitted against the delineated ramifications of the *negro* actions, and thereby justified from a social point of

view since the nation's well being ultimately would benefit everyone; implied is thus that the *negro* acts against the ideals that could only ever alleviate his demise - out of ignorance he actually acts contrary to his own best.

Morally commendable and honourably poor

As *negro* is a morally woeful representation of the lower classes, *humilde* is a category commending this social segment, granting it respect in its recognised struggle.⁽⁷⁶⁾ It was a Thursday afternoon around 2 p.m., I was finishing up some notes from the day before, sitting in Dora's dining room. Outside I could here her talking to her gardener, Isidro. He came every Thursday, mowing her lawn and uprooting the weed in her flowerbeds and around her shrubbery. Every other Thursday was also payday. I could hear their voices, but not the content of their conversation. What I did hear was Dora speaking for longer periods of time and Isidro limiting himself to brief responses. After a while, Isidro packed his gear and left with his old pickup truck. I concluded that he must continue his round as he had several other clients within the same *barrio*. Shortly after Dora entered, and we started talking about the gardener.

"He's a nice man, in his late 40's or early 50's, I am not quite sure. I am not going to ask him. We talked about the upcoming elections. He didn't want to tell me what he is going to vote. *Peronista*, I am sure. Menem, most likely. You have to remember, Menem for him most likely means more work, and Isidro *wants* to work. He is not a layabout, he isn't *vago*, like that useless nephew of his that he sometimes brings along. No, no, Isidro is a sound man, very decent, and he tends well to his work. *No es un desastre* (he isn't a disaster). I don't know very much about him because he doesn't tell very much... well sometimes he opens up a little bit. But you notice, he is very respectful, never out of line... did you hear him? '*Si, Senora, si senora*' (yes, ma'am, yes ma'am)... he doesn't have an opinion about everything, but he keeps it simple and respectful. *Se ubica muy bien, Isidro. Es muy humilde* (He finds his place very well, Isidro. He is very humble). He lives with his wife close to the town in their house. He has two children who go to school. They don't have a lot, but he appears happy. There are a lot of people like him, simple people who go about their work and live modestly. No frills. These are *gente humilde* (humble people)."

Humilde coexists in *profesionales* discourse on lower classes with a set of contrasting and complementary categories. It does not carry with it the stigma of colour that does *negro*. *Humilde*, similar to *negro*, is a category that grows out of an imagery of practices; of conduct, comportment, communicated values and routines. In characterising Isidro as *humilde*, Dora refers to aspects of his lifestyle that underlies this. The concept of *ubicarse* (knowing one's place), and a person who is

ubicado is closely linked to the category of *humilde*. *Humilde* becomes a category of practices associated with lower class conforming to the order to which *profesionales* subscribe, albeit experience in a vastly different manner.

Isidro's perceived ethic, reliability, diligence and predictability in his work; responsibility, stability and commitment to his family; quietude, cordiality and mild mannerism in contact with the employer, are all qualities effectively precluding his association with *negro*. The aspects by which the *profesionales* can endow him with the recognition of *humilde*, are those with which the *profesionales* identify; practices and mannerisms morally valorised by the latter. Connoting dominated and docile servility, to the *profesional, humilde*, is recognition. Honourably struggling, he is of no threat to the order, rather a proponent, humbly constructing his life according to the same normative conventions as do *profesionales*, albeit less spectacularly, on a different scale with lesser means.

Encapsulating practices and people in categories is a practice of imagination, often performed in, and because of, the absence of contact. Neither Dora nor her daughter who will tell you exactly the same things about him, know Isidro on a profound personal level. They do not know his inner thoughts, what he does at home or even outside the *barrio privado* where he works. Their conclusions are derived from a rudimentary level of interaction and what scarce personal information Isidro has disclosed. This means that the perception of him is malleable to context and a temporally discrete normative judgement, as illustrated below.

Some months later, I went away for a couple of weeks on holiday with Dora's family. We had recently returned when one Tuesday night we sat down for dinner and Dora had the following to share.

“Look, the gardener came by today. On a Tuesday, completely unprepared I was. He wanted to get paid. He said something about having done the work at another time, what do I know... anyway, I told him I didn't have any money for him, that he would get paid on Thursday. Can you believe it? I'll tell you where this comes from... this is resentment. It's the same kind of resentment that you meet everywhere, like on the travels, people not wanting to talk to you, looking away and pretending not to understand the questions you pose them. It's resentment, and the thought that lies behind it 'well if you have the money to go on holiday, you also have the money to pay me'. It's very disturbing, and I won't stand for it any longer. It's typical of the *negro, el negro es asi, viste, resentido* (the *negro* is like that, you see, resentful). I told him no, Thursday it is...”

Social classification as articulated in discourse deploys categories to encapsulate practices and

preferences that are associated with lower and higher realms of the social structure. Aspiration and ambition is commonly deemed admirable virtues and ascribed positive value within what could be regarded a morality of self-improvement. However, allowing for various moralities to coexist, we can clearly discern that aspiration and ambition is not unconditionally virtuous, rather they are contingent upon the morality by which they are judged. Knowing one's social place and acting accordingly - *ubicarse* - is a concept by which lower class practices are constituted in discourse, however, it is also an instrument of internal justice, i.e., something that applies to oneself - other *profesionales*.

Mejorarse y ubicarse - the morality of moving up and moving out

A morality of self-improvement as defined by the encouragement and positive judging of striving to better one's social position materialistically but particularly culturally, stands strongly among *profesionales*. Illegitimate lifestyles, i.e., a perceived misrelation between capital converted and a distorted composite capital for the social field wherein it is displayed, is correspondingly denounced, whether carrying reference to working class-taste demonstrated in new money, or *profesionales'* infatuation with and assimilation of jet set glamour.

I was sitting one evening with Maria, looking through some photos from her days at university, as she recalled memories of old school mates. A young man looked at us.

“Ah yes, Daniel...we went together at the University of Belgrano. Let me tell you his story. His parents got divorced during our years together there. His father was, well is, a dentist. He wasn't very well off, but after the divorce he took a mortgage, bought himself a flat in Recoleta, and a car, a BMW at around 70.000 dollars. Then he started to go to all the high society places, the in places where the *farandula* hangs out, thinking he was one of them... I don't know why... and the way he spoke...it was like he always was trying to keep up an image, not talking too loud, not too low, drinking wine, but never too much never too little, never swearing, it was like an act... completely...well something that wasn't real. What *was* real was that his son didn't have shoes practically! Well, he had shoes, but some totally worn out *nauticas* (sailing or deck shoes) with soles with holes in them, while his father was living that life... He paid for his son's tuition I guess, and he came to pick his son up after school in the BMW, but never buying him any clothes or anything...because they didn't have money... it was something crazy. Some people are just incredibly *cholulo*, and this one was a bad case!”

The *cholulo* is perceived as a fake, even though he might not *appear* out of place to the *profesional*, like working class taste in all its splendour inside a *barrio privado*. The lifestyle to which the *cholulo* aspires evokes an imagery of other physical and social settings, and other status symbols.

The dentist is seen as stepping out of the realms that make for the premises of his *real* life, wanting to identify with a social group whose lifestyles are glamorous; not those of tedious and meticulous studies; careful pecuniary calculations and comfortable affluence marked by general prudence and self-discipline.

Being set on achieving a status one has not been ascribed might not be frowned upon. Even though the glitzy world of the *farandula* surely mesmerises most people in the wider society, presenting itself as both lavishly tempting and mythical in its inaccessibility, many *profesionales*, very much in line with their culturally mandated members of the intellectual press, denounce the lifestyle (quite conceivably because of its inaccessibility) as decadent and superficial - obsessed with itself, and “not for us” (Bourdieu, 1984). In the performance of this discourse founded on values inherent to certain moralities claimed as their own by some *profesionales* on behalf of what is increasingly becoming this consolidated upper middle class segment (Svampa, 2001), there is constructed a locus in which to capture and castigate aspirations, practices and actions by invoking the ridiculing agency of the *cholulo* category.

Among the *bailanteros* and the customary patronage of the *bailantas*, the *cheto* style is associated with affluent social strata. Referring to a snob, or a conventionally smartly and expensively dressed person, *cheto* is a charged category of inclusion and exclusion (Skartveit, forthcoming master dissertation). To be identified as *cheto*, individuals are excluded from the solidarity but also constraints of the group as communicated by one’s association with the *bailanta*. In the *bailantas* the threat of the *cheto* undermines class solidarity, and a group justice measuring out the alternatives of exclusion or compliance sanctions stepping out of line. Though there are similarities to the agency of *cheto* in higher circles, we are here considering an aspiration - a *want to get into* a certain social circuit. Punishment and reward are the diametrically opposed reactions to the *cheto* in different fields - different reactions explained by the different meaning and value socially inscribed in the category. However, the meaning of *cheto* is not that straightforward among many *profesionales*. It may very well be a style associated with upper middle and upper class, but it is nevertheless contextually subjected to moral judgement. These moral judgements are mediated through the agency of normative categories for social practices, and similar to *negro* and *humilde*, *cholulo* is instrumental to this process. Acting *cholulo* is deemed as failing to *ubicarse*, in terms of class expectations with reference to practices and preferences.

Can there exist a logic wherein the moralities of *mejorarse* and *ubicarse* are complementary and

compatible? We have a clear idea of the aspirations positively (re)asserted by the *clase media profesional*, seen in morally legitimised and materially rationalised conventions of the social trajectories in these circles. Herein lies the probability and predictability for a series of calculations generating ways of thinking, acting and judging. Aspirations are repudiated or discredited when the lifestyle implied is considered contrary or offensive to the values thought to pervade one's social field (see Gullestad, 1984).

Improving oneself, 'moving up' in life, and remaining conscious of 'one's place', is perfectly possible, if done so *in the proper way*. This has both economical and cultural reference; a flourishing business or a higher university degree, a larger home or proficiency in another language. However, if the displays of social practices and preferences amounting to and communicating social transgression, constitute breaches in values as defined by intersecting and complementary class moralities, then social footing is regarded lost, subsequently undermining the capital conversion.

7

Whys and wherefores - informants' take on informants

Classificatory discourse and traditional narratives

After having submitted a brief sociological description of the objectively observable lifestyle of my informants, and after having contextually analysed the relationship between social practice and class based categories, the purpose of this chapter is to elicit and illustrate informants' discourse on the reproduction of social practices.

I was in the home of Dora and Carlos, sitting down for dinner at 9 p.m. Maria had just come back from her Portuguese class. Earlier that day she had received news from Alejandro, her friend currently residing in Majorca.

M: "Well, now his parents have finally arrived there as well. They are actually settling in over there, the lot of them. Can you imagine?"

D: "What are they going to do there?"

M: "Well, I guess they will do what they always have done; open up a business. At least that's what they'll try. Ale has a whole host of projects going now... mind you, according to *him*, that is. You know, he's made contact with some Russians who are looking to get him involved in a mineral water business. They are looking to export. They gave him some papers to look at, and now he is searching for someone to translate the Russian for him. Neither him nor they speak very well English. Sounds fishy if you ask me, but then, he's always drawn to that. "

C: "Fishy? You can say that again. (shaking his head) Besides, what happened to that wine import business he was planning on opening? Didn't it come to anything?"

M: "Well right now he is involved with a Majorcan who deals with water sports equipment maintenance. They are looking to go into partnership during the tourist season.

D: "There is no end to it. Imagine, he left his studies. If he had put half of the energy into the studies as he does with all these schemes, he would have been finished long ago. But you see, it just isn't him... he doesn't have it in him. He's gone the school of his father, though."

C: "Yeah, the old man is a *chanta*, isn't he? Pretty shady this business with the petrol station. I take it they had to flee the country. *Tipico chanta Argentino*.

M: "Yeah... but he was always involved in some more or less shady business... always looked for the opportunity to make money - fast and easy - without working.

D: "And that's exactly what Ale is doing. He wants to make money without working. That's the school he's had.

M: "But Ale isn't a *chanta*; he won't cheat you or backstab you. You know that, he's a good guy. Well, you know

him. But he's *vago*, you know.

C: "We know that, but these schemes of Argentineans abroad. The ones without education and who can't get qualified jobs, this is the *chanta* way to get by, and they get it from here. They take this with them."

D: (looking at me) "Always these stories about his projects, that's typical of the *versero*, a *charlatán* (talkers, schemers). Here in Argentina you'll find them in sales, businesses where you have to talk and present something. Car salesmen or real estate brokers... typically *verseros*, and many of them are *chantas*."

M: "The family of Ale are... well, *clase comerciante*. True, all of his sisters have higher education, well two of them, the third is a *maestra*, but the family, and how they all arrange their lives, apart from the architect who married another architect and settled in the Nordelta, is very much *clase comerciante*."

"How do you mean?"

M "Look, during the years of hyperinflation, *comerciantes* profited immensely financially. They stocked up and sold later at a more opportune moment, cashing in on huge differences in value. When the stabilisation came under Menem and the things he did with the convertibility and the economical restructuring, these people had a lot of capital and were set for good times. Everybody had credit all of a sudden, and you know, people went crazy buying all the nice things they craved. "

D: "Yeah, one car there, a four-wheel-drive here, a flat in Mar del Plata, a house in a *barrio privado*, family vacations to Miami or the Caribbean, wardrobes full of Ralph Lauren, Lacoste, Christian Dior...spending, spending, spending, you know? It was incredible."

C: "The point is, and what is typical for these people, is that a lot of people live off the business. The father owns the business, and then there are children, sons- and daughters-in-law working there, or not working at all but being supported. This happens all the time, and I see it all the time, black on white, when I do the balance for my customers, many of whom are *comerciantes*. You wouldn't believe the amounts they spend on dinner shows, luncheons, travels etc, and writing it off on the business. All those expenses, and one business. It doesn't add up."

M: "They think, and at least many thought, that the business was a well that would never run dry. And so they lived way beyond what they actually could. Mortgages and loans didn't cause them any worries as long as they had the business. Of course, in the mean time, they ran up a tax deficit that was huge. Very few, if any, paid taxes. It was like they never thought they would have to. But you see, this is the *clase comerciante*. Entire families living off a single source. In many cases we are talking about a shopkeeper supporting a whole bunch of *vagos* with expensive habits. Of course this can't work in the long run. The lifestyles of this class brought them into trouble and ruin, more so than the *shoppings* and the foreign businesses."

Weaved into the discourse are hegemonic categories from traditional porteno narratives. These categories denoting social practices are again contextual to class; *vago* in the lower classes has another connotation than with reference to a person of the petit bourgeoisie. In this classificatory logic, Ale is *vago*, not in the sense of personifying the *negro* idleness seeing the poor resort to

happily receive funds and charity, but in the sense of concentrating his efforts on whimsical schemes of enterprise.

The *vago* personified by Ale is closely linked to the classic and popular narrative of the *vivo*, the quick-minded and street smart porteño schemer who has made improvisation and sniffing out opportunities his life's art. Being a good friend and, according to his friends, not prone to wilfully deceiving anyone, sees him eluding the category of the *chanta*. His father, with whom my informant does not have a close relationship, but knows by reputation, is associated with the *chanta*. Having been involved with various bankrupted businesses and trials, his history provides the narrator with the necessary circumstantial evidence to deem his actions as severely dubious and untrustworthy, and refer to him by this prototype. Like *negro* and *humilde* are moral categories eclipsing social practices associated with the lower classes, the *chanta* is invariably linked to a middle class segment, and foremost that of small business owners and shop keepers. Practices associated with the *chanta* presuppose certain resources, e.g. being articulate, maintaining an appearance and a level of knowledge; elements that are instrumental to the ability of persuasion and ultimately cheating.

Informed by the morality of self-improvement, the informant draws attention to various aspects serving to paint a picture of a lifestyle, that of *clase comerciante*, which stands, implicitly, in contrast to that of *profesionales*. There is no denying Ale's drive for improving his position, however, these are efforts left void of symbolic value for the *profesional*, as lacking the intellectual and cultural alibi granted by formal diplomas issued by recognised institutions. Living ostentatiously combined with no sense of prudence, accumulation, saving or studying, runs contrary to the ideals that are held to be cultivated -passed on and practiced - within the social segment to which the informant belong.

Some practices held to typify the *comerciante* clearly parallels the imagery of working class *negrada*; spending as opposed to saving and accumulating, lack of ambition for acquiring a higher cultural level, and a notion of laziness. However, their apparent differences in lifestyle articulating their socio-economic position preclude the confusion of the two. The *chanta* runs morally afoul to notions of sincerity and honesty, dependability and reliability. The *negro* fails on counts of promiscuity and responsibility, to himself as well as to others. They are, in their own capacities, categories of immorality, and they correspond to various status groups as these lifestyles and social practices are imagined as a whole and constituted in discourse.

With *profesionales'* reference to proper management of accumulated wealth, wide segments of

the middle classes are regarded as “not having this in them“; an explicatory model embedded in discourse that provides differences with a logic. At the basis of this logic, the reason they do not have it in them, lie considerations of a lack of cultural capital whose chief impediment are the social influences of a family background corrupting the values and virtues necessary for success as defined by *profesionales*.

The logics of origins and preferences

Consider Facundo, the engineer of Italian working class background. His education, work, marital status and residence, sees him well situated professionally and socially. In these observable assets, his recognised capital is conventionally composed. However, he expresses a liking for objects and recreational commodities that are somewhat peripheral to currents and conventions among informants. His keen interest in and fondness of fine wines is one of these preferences. Discussing the works and expressions of musicians unknown to many others is another. He prefers the intellectual and subtle humour of Les Luthiers to the genres of obvious, visual or slapstick comedy.⁽⁷⁷⁾ He prefers slow moving European dramas to Hollywood blockbusters. As for dressing, he will invariably wear uncontroversial and traditionally cut garments, anything but daring in colour, but when going out or paying visits, always sporting one of the labels common among *profesionales*; Lacoste, Ralph Lauren or Christian Dior.

I was out late one night with a group of friends in a trendy new restaurant in the *barrio* of Belgrano. It was María's birthday, and some of her friends were there. This is a common way of celebrating such an occasion. The person inviting her friends will often pay part of the bill, like a round of drinks or a few pizzas; anything extra is paid by the invited ones. Maria and I had agreed upon a menu in advance with the maitre d', and we had decided to split the bill. We decided to have wine with our pizzas. Immediately upon being handed the wine list by the waiter I passed it on to Facundo, demonstrating that I placed my trust in what I recognized as his knowledge on the subject. He duly responded by choosing a bottle after some consideration. Facundo had chosen a wine on earlier occasions, and by now, we had established that he had the decisive say when it came to wine. Some weeks later, heading for a Sunday barbecue at the house of María's parents, I brought with me a bottle of the wine of the same brand that Facundo had chosen that night. We wined and dined, and as often before, we entered into a conversation about customs and traditions, a diverse and definitely cherished topic among most *profesionales* I know, a practice providing participants a chance to

demonstrate general and quaint knowledge, but just as importantly, posing educated and poignant questions. Dora, María's mother, asserted upon my apparent culinary pleasure:

"We might not know very much about alcohol and wine, you see, we don't have a tradition for that like you have. But we do have a tradition for meat, and we certainly know about that. Did you enjoy the wine, by the way? I haven't seen that brand that you brought."

"Well, it was recommended to me by Facundo. Well, not recommended as such, but when we were out celebrating María's birthday a couple of weeks ago, he chose it from the wine list. He has done so several times. I guess he knows quite a bit about wines."

Maria confirmed that such was the case, that apparently young Marinelli had acquired quite the knack for picking the right wines. She herself, like her mother and father, pleads ignorance about alcohol in general. The gaping and the rolling of eyes suggested that Dora was not convinced.

"Aaaah, but Facundo Marinelli is a *reverendo* (incredible) *cholulo*! Come on, what does he know about wines? This is typical *cholulaje*! People pretending to have some nice habits or some special tastes or things they like. And yes, he has become more and more *cholulo* with the years. He has completely distanced himself from where he comes from. Have you by any chance seen or met his old friends? No? Well they are not exactly what you would expect based on how you see him today. That's quite a motley crew of various characters. No, I tell you, Facundo is not the same guy he was a few years ago. He has changed completely.

"Did Facundo marry into a family that was vastly different from his own?"

"Well, you have to keep in mind that they are simple people, with absolutely no pretensions whatsoever. It's the whole Italian thing; you know, not very *fino*, but good, family-loving, unpretentious people. That's the thing that Natalia doesn't like so much, you see, those Sunday luncheons with all that fatty food in unimaginable quantities. It's a bit *grosero* (often meaning rude or lacking in manners, here: unrefined), you know. Natalia's family is different, you see, they are complicated people.

The dichotomy of *sencillo* and *complicado*, or simple and complicated, refers in this case to several things. Being *sencillo* is often (but not always) linked to not being *fino* (delicate or refined), a characteristic often used in "porteño speak", and as such it serves as a category denoting a lack of (cultured) taste, however, it is morally commendable in meaning void of snobbery. Conversely,

complicado can often stand to mean particular or choosy, and as such reflecting a sense of distinction regarding aesthetic preferences. On the other hand, being *complicado* in your attitude may denote not easy-going, and as such carrying a propensity for being susceptible to or easily offended by the unrefined. Based on this knowledge I probed further:

"Was there a lot of friction between the families around the marriage?"

"I don't really know, I wouldn't be at all surprised if her parents had some doubts, but then again, with the mess they found themselves in at that time, how could they possibly say anything? The divorce of her parents was more or less concealed, you know; a cause of great embarrassment for the mother, and of course, great pain for Natalia. After the divorce her mother has changed a lot, mind you. She is not so strung as she was before."

"And her father, does he have any relationship with his in-laws, or does he see them in a derogative way?"

"Ha! No, he doesn't mix very much with anyone. He's not arrogant; the point is he's very *pipikuku*... very particular in some things... quite pretentious. Anyway, what on earth could he possibly say? Living with that *negra* that he does! He certainly lost his right to judge anyone."

"You are talking about the swimming instructor for whom he left Natalia's mother? Why do you call her *negra*?"

"Look, you don't have to wonder about that. *A swimming instructor*... going after a well situated married man much older than her... please. It's obvious. "

In the light of what we have submitted of circumstantial information, let us examine closer these abstracts. What is it that makes, or has made, Facundo *cholulo*? The issue about the wine offset Dora's reaction, however, she has known Facundo well for many years and meets him every now and then through her daughter's friendship with him and his wife. She also knows the families in question very well, often having spent holidays in the same places like the upscale and fashionable summer retreat that is the Atlantic coast town of Pinamar.

Dora cannot and does not deny the accomplishments of Facundo with respect to his education and professional situation. As such he has achieved what is very much the status by which personal fulfilment and social success is measured in this social world. She referred to the motley crew with whom he used to hang in his younger days; a milieu that to outsiders stuck out through their long

bailantero-like hairdos, heavy metal music affiliation and pot smoking gatherings. Set against this background, there is no denying his success. Nevertheless, he is letting it be known that over the years he has acquired some preferences or tastes associated with a lifestyle to which Dora is unfamiliar - not by imagination but by experience.

Whether Facundo really knows about wines or not is obviously not the point. Dora, based on how she knows the family of Facundo and so his background, does not believe in the legitimacy of these preferences. As such, by virtue of being Argentinean, and by virtue of coming from a simple, unrefined middle class background, the cultural and social implausibilities of the knowledge that would supposedly foster these preferences is what deem them *cholulo*. The moral calamity of this *cholulaje* is emphasized in Facundo allegedly distancing himself from the ways of his family. In attempting to cultivate an affinity for the perceived illegitimate, he is running the risk of *desubicarse* or wandering socially astray.

Whether Facundo broke social rank in marrying Natalia is not determined, although informants suggests that he did enter into a family placed higher up in the social structure within the middle classes; defined by economical standing and refinement of customs. However, the embarrassment caused by the infidelity that lead to the divorce, precluded whatever legitimate reason the bride's family might have had in objecting to the marriage. The woman for whom Natalia's father left her mother is by default categorized as a *negra*. Outside of Natalia's family and barely within it, no one knows this woman; only by reputation and hearsay. The fact that she was a swimming instructor does not alone give rise to this categorization. This category alludes to practices, and so the informant refers to her actions. She was younger and made out to wilfully seduce the father of Natalia. That is morally condemned as promiscuous conduct. The actions of such moral corruptness resulting in a break-up of a marriage, *in liaison with* her lower social standing suggested by her occupation, makes possible the categorization. It seems implausible that had the woman been a *profesional* - an accountant or a lawyer - and of correspondingly good social standing, that this category could have been justifiably applied to her actions. Then again, the informant could have argued that the point has already been made in that such wasn't the case - and never would be; a decent woman would never be a home wrecker.

A number of insults can be used of the actions of the father; he is among the informants certainly not exempt from responsibility. However, most of them (like *viejo baboso*, stupid old drooler, or *boludo*, idiot) are not categories pertaining to discourses of certain moralities. His infidelity and the

subsequent divorce are not captured by any categories, by any informant, denoting a compromised morality *associated with class*; being a wealthy accountant, possessing a high level of *educación* and even a certain appearance, in addition to the financial responsibility and generosity he continually exerts towards his children, precludes this judgment.

Moral discourses among *profesionales* that draw on categories evoking imageries, is instrumental in constituting and explaining the lifestyles and social practices of other social segments, and furthermore, the propensity of individuals for perpetuating these reproductive practices. The cultivation and performance of this discourse, as seen in the subjective experience of the actions of others and observed social events, effectively draws a distinction between *profesionales* and *non-profesionales*.

8

Proximity and distance; actions, perceptions and reflections

As explained, friendships in this social field are often made at university level or in connection to recreation, almost invariably implying that friends, acquaintances and romantic partners are from similar socioeconomic background. This however, is not the case of Leo and Guada, even though they met at a private reunion. The purpose of this chapter is to present an idea of how agents' transcending of social borders elucidates the homogeneity of social space, illustrated by the experiences these actions provoke.

Leo and Guada - "a match made in wonderland"

Guada, 26, comes from an economically well-to-do family from the *barrio* of Floresta. Her father is the chief accountant for a large tobacco company and her mother is a housewife who never put her accountant degree into practice. She has three brothers, one older and two younger than her, one of which is an adopted cousin. All of them have taken or are in the process of taking higher education. Guada left her studies in accounting and is currently immersed in studies of tourism in another institute. She works outside studies in the logistics business of her eldest brother. Although her business card states that she is an account manager, it is commonly understood that Guada's tasks consist in answering the phone and other secretarial duties.

Guada has spent several years in psychological group therapy, during which she made several friends with whom she still keeps contact. According to her friends, Guada has suffered significantly for her overweight, 'something that typically will be badly discriminated against here in Argentina'. Guada discloses that the years in therapy and maturing has helped her rid herself of insecurities, anxieties and 'dealing better and more confidently with people'. Sometimes she will limit herself to brief utterances; for example when finding herself in the company of the eloquent and knowledgeable Facundo and the blond, lean and delicate (*fina*: expresses manners and bodily comportment) Natalia. These three will sometimes meet as they have a mutual friend in María. On her own turf, among her own friends, Guada is loose and appears confident with her surroundings, in that she speaks seemingly without constraint, laughs, jokes and participates in all the action.

Leo, 22, is a factory worker, living until recently with his parents and sister, in the province of

Buenos Aires. As his father is unemployed due to an accident that left him blind, and his mother is physically incapacitated to work outside the home, Leo largely contributes to the support of the family through his salary.⁽⁷⁸⁾ After recently moving up in the production he got a raise. Leo did not attend secondary school, and the lack of formal education has contributed to his poor mastery of reading and writing. Recently, Leo moved out from his family's house, now renting a furnished flat nearby the plant where he presently works double shifts, from 6 in the morning until 8 at night, six times a week.

Through María, I meet sometimes with Guada and Leo at the weekends, as we go for drinks or something to eat. Often we end up shooting pool in a pub. Both Leo and Guada are fond of dancing, frequently going alone to different *boliches*. They never patronise the chic establishments of the noted trendy zones, instead they go the more popular and more accessible places. As Guada will not challenge her parents by spending the night at Leo's place, I have on several occasions left them as they were heading for an *albergue transitorio*.

One night, Maria, Guada, Leo and I were sitting in a cafe in a posh zone of Belgrano, after having had pizzas, beer and a bit of pool in a low key, slightly worn down pub somewhere in the *barrio*. Leo started talking about his family, his neighbourhood and his work. We didn't say much; we kept listening, Guada giving Leo cues every now and then, correcting and complementing his information. I was struck by his openness, talking about most everything that went on inside his house, from the economical predicaments of the family to the physical ailments of his mother. I had never before, going out many times with María's friends, heard an account so unrestrained and detailed. Leo doesn't abstain from talking about personal things on the few occasions he has met Facundo and Natalia either, as is the case for Guada. I had grown used to the scarce personal information revealed in these settings, and was taken aback.

He was upset with how things were at home. His mother was always on his back, nagging him about his untidiness, but in the next instance complaining that he didn't bring home food, snacks or even leftovers from barbecues he had attended. He was annoyed by the relationship between his mother and sister, as the latter 'got away with everything' and he was made to be the black sheep in most situations. He was tired of what he felt was exploitation, and he informed us of his plans of moving out, renting a place closer to his work. Also, he lambasted his mother for comparing him to a drunken layabout who lived down the road from their house: "I told her, don't you go comparing me with that *negro de mierda* (fucking negro) down at the corner!" After a while we asked for the bill. I paid for María

and myself, Leo paid, as always, for both him and Guada. We parted shortly after as Leo was escorting Guada home, a practice that resulted in a two and a half hour detour in getting back to his parents' house. I wanted to know what Maria made of them, what she thought of Leo and their chances.

“Naaa...who’s to say... it bugs me, though, that he always has to pay. What is the matter with her? He spends all his salary paying for them going out every weekend. Guada has money, you know, either from her parents or from her salary. It shouldn’t be like that. But she has all these romantic ideals, you know, she’s a dreamer. And I have to tell you; she is definitely not telling everything to her parents. I don’t know if they will accept him. He doesn’t have a very good... well, level, you know. He didn’t even finish *secundario*! (latter part of junior high school and high school) There are no prospects for people like that. They are the same as the ones working in the factory where my father works (as the accountant of Caldini), *operarios*; they have no basis on which to progress.

Saturday night, a few weeks later, María and I went to Floresta to celebrate Guada’s birthday in her family’s house. Apart from the hostess, Leo and the two of us, present were Guada’s two youngest brothers, Ernesto and Pablo, a friend of Ernesto, and five others, making up two couples and a single woman, all in their mid to late twenties. The single woman (whom I later learnt had a boyfriend away on TV production business) and the females of the two couples were friends of Guada’s from the therapy sessions. Their boyfriends were unconnected; one was a medical student of Korean descent, the other a political aid of a known senator, *licenciado* in political science. Guada had made pizzas in abundance, and I was later informed that several invitees had not come. Beer was put out, and Leo was generously and jokingly pouring in my glass.

I sat back and followed the conversation that was moving a bit slowly but picked up in intensity with the focus on social issues, the current crisis of the country and outside presentations of the Argentinean demise. Salient points were urban poverty, the *villas miserias* and the daily reports of more and more people living below the poverty lines in various provinces. “I know how I think about it”, said Diego, the *licenciado*. “Yes, I know”, his girlfriend hastily interrupted, “we don’t need to hear it... believe me, you don’t want to hear it”, she said, looking apologetically around at the rest of us. “Look”, Diego pressed on,

“in Spain these days, they are promoting tours to Argentina and talking about the poverty that ‘you might get a chance to see’. It’s like: ‘if you want to see poor people, go to Argentina, there they have stacks.’ Well, come and see our poor! I feel terribly about this, it’s extremely embarrassing. One should just round them all up, all those *negros*, and put them down! Alternatively, you can ship them off to Tucuman (one of the worst off provinces in terms of people living under

the poverty line)!”

As an outsider, I was asked what I thought about Buenos Aires. After my ranting, Diego made a comment on Norwegians being the people in the world who read the most books in the world, and subsequently enjoyed the reactions around the table - both over the fact and his knowledge of this.⁽⁷⁹⁾ After this, the conversation centred on the cherished and seemingly unexhaustive topic of travels; the girlfriend of the medical student had recently had some visitors from Canada whom she had met when she herself had been there. I asked her why she had gone there and how she had met them. I got the ominous feeling that I was alone in my ignorance, considering the eerie silence my question left in the group. Somewhat hesitantly at first but then steadily she gave me a vague account of knowing someone there and meeting people more or less by chance. It was only much later I found out that she had been visiting her father who had walked out on the family when she was little. He had moved to Canada, and the girl and her younger brother had been raised by distant kin and later themselves, after her mother had died shortly after the father’s departure.

It was obvious to me during all this time that *both Leo and I* constituted outsiders. Leo, however, remained mute. I remember thinking that this had happened before, and I heard myself wondering “does he even hear us?” and “does he even relate in the slightest to what they are talking about?” I didn’t know whether to feel bad or not about these personal and tacit queries. I was rescued from this taunting introspection by the suggestion made by Guada that we go out in the garden on the back of the house. I seconded the motion enthusiastically.

A portable stereo and various tapes were brought out. Leo inserted one of them, and seconds later upbeat *quarteto* tones filled the garden area. The rest of the crowd continued talking among themselves, picking up the conversations from inside nursing what they had in their glasses. Leo and Guada danced. Leo, big limbed and 2.05 metres, is an avid and able dancer (although I am no expert) when it comes to *quarteto* and *cumbia*, and he was clearly enjoying himself caught in the rapture of the moment. Guada is somewhat physically challenged both from an accident she had a few years ago, and from her innate anatomy. These two factors severely impair her sense and ability of movement, making her general bodily comportment awkward and cumbersome. But Guada loves dancing, and she was glowing - not catching the beat once.

Later, back in the living room, it was time to cut the cake. Sparkling wine and cider were brought out. Leo and I were given bottles to open. Whereas two of them provided little grief, the third one,

with a plastic cork, was resilient. Leo was not lost for ideas. He put the top of the bottle in between the living room-door and its frame, opening it by the closing of the door jerking out the cork. The others were staring on in disbelief. Paolo, the youngest brother reacted angrily as the paint had come off the hinges: "What the hell did you do that for? Don't you see that this whole place has been painted recently? You can't go about doing things like that." The reprimand faded out in the murmur of the crowd and we were soon all smiles again as the glasses were filled.

On our way back to Belgrano, Maria and I started talking about Diego. She confided that she found him *insoportable* (unbearable).

"And when he started talking about the poor people and what he wanted to do to some of them... well, think of Leo, what on earth did he feel like hearing that. You can't say those things, not in front of someone who might feel he is talking about them. That's just unacceptable."

We arrived at the bottle opening.

"Oh my God, yes, did you see what he did? Listen to me... you can't do that. Yes, I am sure it's very practical but it's like... well that's just *cosa de...* you know... you don't do that. And Pablo got mad. Didn't you see that their home was very nicely decorated and maintained? Leo doesn't notice those things. You know, it has to do with your upbringing, your social background and your *educación*. People like Leo they don't have the *cultura* for appreciating a house or a room decorated and maintained in a certain way - that's just the way it is."

Some months later I was in María's flat in Belgrano, waiting for Guada to arrive. María had agreed to let me ask Guada some questions there. She herself was at her parents place working, but was to return later that night. Guada arrived and told me that Leo would be coming along later. 10 minutes into our conversation Leo showed up. I was not going to send him out in the streets walking as suggested I could by both Guada and María. We all sat down around the dining room table, with me talking to both of them. We started talking about the upcoming birthday party of Leo that he was having two weeks later, in his rented flat in San Martin (in the province of Buenos Aires, some 30 minutes outside the city). I made a list of all the people invited and jotted down the little information he provided me with regarding every one of them. They were people from his work, friends from the old neighbourhood and some cousins and their girlfriends. Also, I was told that several of Guada's friends would be present, some of whom I had already met at her party.

After a few hours, María arrived, with 8 or 9 bags of groceries as she had done the *compras* on

her way home. Guada went to help María in the kitchen putting the goods into place, while Leo and I kept talking in the *comedor* (dining room). A small *picada* (cold plate of crisps, nuts, pieces of cheese, ham, salami, often accompanying a round of beers) was prepared as well as cup cakes and *budín* (traditionally an English style cake in the shape of a pudding, served with coffee or tea) was put forth. It was soon getting late, but Leo and Guada seemed to have no intention of leaving. I had matters to discuss with María afterwards, so we started hinting at being tired after a while.

Suddenly, María reprimanded Guada for kicking at the foot of the table. “Guada, don't stamp your feet on the table!” I thought this was embarrassing, but Guada didn't seem notably distressed.

We started talking about the wedding the two of them had recently attended. It was the wedding of Leo's cousin of 20 and Guada's childhood friend of 29. The wedding had brought together the families of Leo and Guada, and kin related to the two being married. Leo was talking about someone with whom he had not struck a very good rapport. The man, an engineer, was a relative of the bride. “This guy, you know, he's like ‘who the hell are you, why should I even greet you’, you know? He doesn't want to talk to people and he's acting like you're not there.” “Sounds like he is a bit arrogant, right?” I probed. “He's very *creido*,” interjected Guada, “he thinks he's 'all that’”.

A little later, Leo and Guada went to take the bus back to her house. Leo was to spend the night on the couch in the living room. Afterwards, María was outraged at the state of the place.

“Look at this mess! Why on earth didn't you tell them to take their shoes off? You can do that, you know, Guada wouldn't mind, I have told her that before. Look at this table! Crumbs and cigarette ash all over the place, except for in the ashtray and on the placemats. It's unbelievable. Oh my God! Look at the new chair covers where he was sitting. It's black from his shoes. I knew this would happen. Guada wasn't kicking the floor table, you know, but I said it because I was convinced that *he* was. And I was right. It's a disaster. The point is, they are *sucios* (dirty)... well Guada is *sucia*, and Leo doesn't know how to... control himself, or act. Why oh why does she make things so complicated? This relationship is never going to go anywhere. She lied to me as well, she said that Leo was studying to finish *secundario*, but he's not studying, he's working double shifts. But he didn't know what she had told me, that's why he said it. So he makes more money only to spend more. You heard what he said about not being big on saving. He has saved, what was it, 180 pesos? What the hell is that? They are planning on building a house? It'll take forever to get that money, what with no credit available. You see they need help from their parents. Help he can't get and help her parents probably won't give. Look, they always gave her brothers everything, she was always short-changed, and you think they are going to help her buy a house with this guy? It's never going to happen. They are just different worlds, you know. All illusions. I have to admit something, all the groceries I brought in, I did it like that because I wanted to see his reaction. Did you hear him? ‘Wow, *nena*, who is all that food for?’ Because that's how they buy food you know, a little every day. They don't know what it's like to be able to stock up the freezer and the fridge, so of course, you saw what he ate.

He didn't even touch the *longaniza* (a quite pricey sausage similar to salami) or the *Gruyere*, what did he eat? the *papa fritas* (crisps) and the *budín*; the *porquería* (crap). “

We started talking about the upcoming party, and María was less than convinced. “I don't know.

“I really don't want to go there, to that place. Besides, it's dangerous out there; there are *villas* and everything. And who's going to be there (looking over the list I made)? You know... I have nothing in common with these people, what on earth would we talk about? You can go, of course, I am sure it would be interesting for your thesis, but please don't ask me to go. This guy, and this guy... friends from the neighbourhood, cousins (reading to herself)... yes, these are the ones who live all in the same house with the mother of one of them, their girlfriends and babies... oh my God, *una negrada*, oh please... don't you see? This is what we are becoming. This is what the country is turning into. And these people see nothing wrong with this! I really do not want to go. And Guada said that her friends would go there? Not on your life! There isn't going to be a single soul among her friends, or from *capital* for that matter, going out there. Guada is complicating the lives of everyone with this relationship, and she is letting herself be lead by illusions, because it's so important for her to have a boyfriend. I know, I know, everyone has rights, and her parents should be realistic; Guada isn't going to catch a handsome, successful man, ok? That's just the fact, and I have seen this many times before. Poor boys, or black guys from Brazil for example, they go out with unattractive white girls from the middle classes. It's a way of improving socially. This is classic. This society is very superficial; you know that, looks are very important. Being beautiful is important. Guada isn't, and her parents should realise that she can't have everyone. But things are getting really complicated here. She is changing. She doesn't see the things the way they are any longer. She said that they never discriminate in her family. *Mentira* (lies)! And that guy they were talking about. Guada called him *creido*! Look, he is an engineer, for Christ's sake! He's got a completely different level than most of the people who were there. Why should he feel obliged or compelled to be interested in or having any proximity to Leo and the others, when he clearly doesn't? Why? “

A couple of weeks later, María was proven right in her predictions. She had decided not to go to Leo's party. Late at night María got a phone call from Guada telling her that no one from the city was going out there. María hung up and concluded calmly: “What did I tell you? Not a soul from *capital* is going out there... and they never were, no matter what they had been telling her.”

By ways of inferring and abstracting

Openness, suspicion and suppression

Leo is untypical among my informants. He appears to exert very little deliberate suppressing of *what might for others* be thought of as negative information; domestic conflicts, the economical

malaise of the family and the physical predicaments of his parents. Furthermore, he does so to people that he doesn't know very well. This is highly uncommon among my *profesionales* informants. The incident with the girl who went to Canada is familiar, in that people will often explain something with the minimum amount of personal admissions. I know this to be a pattern, as I have confirmed cases of informants withholding personal information in conversations or answering questions. Guada, for example, will tell María very openly about what goes on between her and her parents, and between her parents and Leo. I come by this information second hand. These situations including strangers, acquaintances and confidants should say something about the role of the social relations of friendship. We should be careful not to generalize uncritically, but, like María, July and Natalia have their closest confidant in their mothers, even though they have what they consider close friends with whom they have *confianza* (confidence, trust). This is not the case for Guada, as is seen in her uninhibited willingness to share personal information with her closest friends, and within the ritualised setting of group therapy. Beatriz, July's mother, has her own theories about friendship:

"No, it's true, people don't open up on a very personal level. That is to say, I talk to everyone, and everyone talks to me. When I go to the bank or the supermarket, I talk to the cashiers, the checkout-girls and the product demonstrators. They tell me all sorts of things; about their families and so on. I think maybe it's easier to talk to a stranger, sometimes. Because, you feel that this person isn't going to judge you. That's the main reason why people don't touch personal or difficult subjects, like things causing them heartache or depressions, because they don't want to be judged. I have had friendships, but you know... you get a sense that they are not real. Estella of whom you have heard, she calls me every once in a while, but all she talks about is the wonderful party she went to, the wonderful people she met etc. It just doesn't interest me. It's all about keeping up appearances, and communicating your own success or well-being. If you keep it on the surface no one can hurt you, but they will also lose interest. That's the difficulty with friendship. People are scared to talk about what bothers them because of 'what would they think about me?' and 'what would they say about the state of my life?'"

My personal impression coincides very much with this account, that friendship does not constitute a site for personal exchanges and moral support.⁽⁸⁰⁾ The primary confidant (speaking of young women) is invariably the mother.

I do not intend to open up the debate of the status of psychoanalysis in general or in Buenos Aires in particular, but these services are very much used by a wide range of people in cases of personal distress; insecurities, anxieties, depressions or when in need of moral support or simply

conversation. Psychoanalysis does of course provide this service elsewhere as well, however, in many cases, friendship might be a locus just as common for the exchange of this kind. With the fear of being judged cited as a reason for not sharing personal information, there is also the implication of suspicion.

Suspicion finds its nourishment in the narratives of some of the shady porteño characters. It is complementary to a distrust that finds its legitimacy in many discourses; towards the poor, the public employees, the political rulers and *comerciantes*. Distrust can also be seen on the interpersonal level where fear of being judged, for some, precludes a certain kind of exchange. This is seen in relation to the need of keeping up appearances. Just what these appearances are *depends on what is conceived of as socially compromising* in the social field of the agents. For that reason, it would be naïve to suggest that Leo, on account of his openness, has *no* or *less* preoccupation with keeping up appearances, however, the observation and the circumstantial knowledge might suggest that the socially compromising has another meaning content for him; he perceives differently *what is socially compromising*.

Guada concealed the fact that Leo is working double shifts and instead chose to tell María that he is taking evening classes. Why? It seems plausible that Guada *does have* an understanding of María's likely response; in the particular context in question, they would have a shared idea of the meaning content of the socially compromising, and so Guada keeps a lid on it. Similarities in lifestyles and trajectories made possible that they be friends in the first place, let alone meeting. Through their friendship they have also developed an awareness and consciousness of the other's values and sensibilities. In fear of being judged, or having her relationship judged by a friend who is nevertheless a confidant, she opts for fabricating a story she knows will go down well with the morality of *mejorarse* known to be dear by this confidant. This temporarily saves her from questions like 'what she is doing with this guy', 'where is this relationship going', and basically, in the words of the informant: "seeing the things as they really are". Social fear outweighs trust, and the evasion of being judged can result in charades where familiarity with the right expectancies and moralities is used in designing cover-ups.

Passing judgement

Diego, the political aid, has no qualms about voicing an opinion. The only time he did so, however, was on a subject on which he might have felt himself unquestionable, unapproachable, undisputable.

As María told me afterwards:

"This guy is *insoportable*, he represents those kind of people who have absolutely no regard for who *you* are, seeing as what *they* are is the most important thing. He is not going to give a shit that you are an anthropologist from a European or Scandinavian country. These guys think they are untouchable wherever they are, and they think the world of themselves. He's the press consultant for the senator wife of presidential candidate Kirchner, you know. He's connected."

This man breaks with what is perceived as good conduct and social etiquette, precisely by expressing exactly what he means. Considering María's reaction, it is down to his disregard for 'people present who might feel hurt by this'. Whether this is down to a mistake or cynicism is not considered. He is deemed arrogant. This however, is the only thing he can be accused of. His actions will not be judged that of *grosero*, *bruto* (brutish, unrefined, crude) or *maleducado* (bad mannered). His socioeconomic position and professional education grants him cultural recognition, an accumulative effort that he cannot be denied. His arrogance therefore is reduced to an unpleasant trait of his personality.

He is made representative of many others; equals whose cultural capital will not be questioned, bad attitudes notwithstanding. Even though his daily business has to do with promotion, campaigns and politics, he escapes the label of the *chanta*. There seems to be no other factor preventing this than him being a *profesional*, *licenciado* in political science.

By contrast, we should consider the incident involving the engineer of whom Leo and Guada spoke, after their attending of the wedding. We recall that the man in question had come across as improperly indifferent to Leo, and was described as what could be imagined as impolite. Guada used the concept of *creido* in her characterization. This offset a different reaction on the part of María. Based on the account, the engineer had neither acted in the way nor said the things that Diego had, however, María justified the former's conduct by default, referring to what *kind of person this necessarily had to be*, based on his profession; his cultural level, his *educación* and interests as conceived of by María, exempted him from having to show any interest in people with whom he would have nothing in common. Hearing Guada talking about him as *creido* was another indication that Guada 'does not longer see things as they are'.

To María, differences between people with reference to education and culture, both explain and justify modes of socially asymmetric interaction. The loyalty expressed in her account is clear; an

identification with another *profesional*, to her, unfairly regarded unfavourably. Fuelled by the provocation of being accused of *creido* (possibly projected onto herself), Maria uses Leo's and Guada's account to turn the table of classification by singling out the social conditions that can result in this misguided categorisation. María cannot say this directly to Guada or Leo; that would mean explicating things that might be belittling or hurtful. Saying it, in euphemistic terms to Guada when alone with her, might be considered. Most imaginable counterstatements or confrontations would be deemed completely inappropriate, signifying either a pathological lack of sensitivity (as in the case of Diego) or a miscomprehension of the *confianza* between them. As these concerns outweigh (either subconsciously or by calculation) the impetus of the reaction, María restrains herself to vent her frustrations afterwards.

Again, as seen in Maria's accounts, the act of passing moral judgement is a matter of context, and so her attitudes towards people and relations are not fixed or unimpressionable. She passes judgment on the pair of them, and for different reasons. She recognizes that socializing with Guada's friends is taking its toll on Leo's finances. This gives their plans of building a home an air of illusion, as Leo's ability to save is severely hampered. This is making matters worse since Leo is already labouring under the *negro* predicament of mindless spending, something that Guada laments but cannot prevent as 'it's his money'. However, Guada is made morally accountable for letting her illusions of traditional romance (in where the man always picks up the tab) undermine Leo's, at least hypothetical, chances of progress.

Distance and imagination

María recognizes Leo's honesty and hard work, the hallmark of *gente humilde*. Remaining *clase baja*, though, has other implications. His socio-economic (no formal education and no prospects of economic help from parents) position is deemed very difficult from which to progress, contributing to the unlikelihood of the concept of Leo and Guada. Guada's parents, most notably the mother, have not taken to Leo very well. According to Guada, her mother didn't attend the wedding of Guada's friend (blaming illness) because of the prospect of meeting with, let alone being seated with, Leo's parents. The reason why Guada and Leo wait until late before they go to her house is to avoid any complication it might produce if the others have still not gone to bed. Leo, at 2.05, sleeps on a small three-seat couch, no guest arrangements are made.

The marks of class are easily identified for the informants determining Leo's social standing.

Social action however, is more fluid, as comportment, antics, speech and opinions are manifested, and seemingly filtered through the notions of *nivel cultural*, which is very much the synthesis of *educación* and taste, a conceptual pair closely related and mutually causal. Explaining Leo's comportment, antics and taste finds its medium in the notion of *cultura*, of which individuals of *clase baja* is thought to have little or nothing.⁷⁶ With *clase baja*, the socioeconomic differences *naturalises* this lack in *profesional* discourse; Leo cannot possess the culture to appreciate the elements (stylistic or intellectual) of the *profesionales'* domain.

Correspondingly, his socioeconomic standing efficiently serves to explain his actions and preferences; Not taking part in conversations; brilliantly and effortlessly performing a certain dance, and resorting to unconventional measures in solving practical tasks are all markers of different social ingenuity and lifestyles. The dance is a mark of an affinity and familiarity with a style commonly associated with working class. The falling out of conversation is seen as a lack of knowledge which in turn is caused by no education or interests, the liking for the *porquería* in foodstuffs is explained by socioeconomic proximity to the realm of necessities, and the unintentional vandalism is an expression of the failure to discern the aesthetic deliberation that goes into a cultured home and the bearing this has on the proper comportment.

There *is* distance between Leo and the group of people otherwise connected to Guada. Leo is in socially unfamiliar terrain. Sitting and talking for hours, participating in a conversation defining and referring to a social field, does require a certain kind of accumulated experience. It is a common practice for most *profesionales* as we have seen in the case of the *confiterías*. It also requires personal experience such as having been places and having done things, like travelling and other leisure activities largely inaccessible for many people. Furthermore, the art of conversation implies a feel for the game, i.e., a habitual consciousness and mastery of what to say and what not to say (Bourdieu, 1984). Limited discrete knowledge of certain issues is remedied by basic namedropping and appropriate questions. This practice cannot be convincingly undertaken without some accumulated experience; of the discourse itself and the personal references with which one enters into the exchange. There are no shortcuts to social mastery of this sort; it is first and foremost contingent upon familiarity, having done it too many times to remember.

In analysing this situation with a focus of how informants experience one's proper social field as articulated upon the introduction of a social outsider, socio-economic standing again has a clear bearing on what kind of moral judgment one is subjected to, i.e., the determination of class calls on

different categories. In the practice of social classification, a significant factor is that of distance. Distinction is perceived during interaction, and explained by social distance. Social distance - socio-economic standing or cultural level - must be seen in relation to physical distance; of accessibility and boundaries. This presents classification as a practice of imagination - of expectation. Imagining draws on experience, consolidated images and categories.

9

Symbolic capital and the process of social classification

In this chapter I will draw particular attention to symbolic capital as developed by Bourdieu (1977, 1984, 1998), and its role in the process of social classification. I also wish to explore an adaptation of *systems of relevancies* (Schutz, 1972) in synthesis with symbolic capital, and how this applies to the study at hand.

We are witnessing the (re)production and performance of a discourse that identifies the socioeconomic foundations of an objective reality to ultimately lie at the core of practices and orientations. The cultivation of this discourse is the constitution of knowledge, ‘to see things as they really are.’ I submit a last informant’s statement, against which I will consider the concept of symbolic capital more closely. This is a take on the culture of consumption and stylisation of life that has emerged among porteños during the last decade; marked by ambiguities of modernity and recontextualisation of social and national identity. The customs and practices that have for many come to symbolise this era, has emblematically been called ‘pizza and champagne’; encapsulating general cultural trends of hedonistic consumption and transnational mimesis, although with an acrimonious implication of an insufficient appreciation.

Pizza and champagne; 'Polo Ralph', 'cuatro por cuatro' and 'shit for brains'
We had come back from dinner at, ‘Tucson’, a Northern American style steak house/bar/restaurant. I was in the company of several of the informants already mentioned and some of their friends. We started talking about the fact that several of the guests at the restaurants had been watching the American Super Bowl presented live on a wide screen while we had been there. Dora let rip:

"It's just unbelievable. American football, what's that? People here don't even understand what it is. But that's not important, obviously. The important thing is that you have to like it, regardless. Because it's happening there, and the things that come from *Estados Unidos*, well... you have to like that. People just don't think. We import the worse things from everywhere, like the millions of immigrants who came with the last wave; usurpers and schemers. And nowadays, people completely uncritically have to indulge in everything we have imposed on us, without having any relationship to it. Why? How many more fast food chains? How many more malls and supermarkets? How many more purchases and carts filled to the rim with things you really don't need? And what's happening to the real values? People send their kids to ridiculously expensive private schools, and they don't even care if the children can read, or the kind of friends they make. All is about status... and learning English. What on earth is the point of that when you don't even know how to speak

properly your own language? Have you heard young people today? They don't know how to express themselves. They don't know how to talk. I am sure their vocabulary consists of a hundred words. Everything is '*boludo*' and '*boludeces*'. They don't know how to behave, either. What is the problem in sitting up straight on a chair? Where is the difficulty in placing one's feet on the floor and not on the seat in front of you while on the train? Oh yes, they may send their children to the *colegios bilinguales* to learn *Ingles* and *computación*, and glow in the social light that might beam on them, but it's all just so... incredibly stupid. Big houses, ok, swimming pools, maids working all day long having to wear uniforms while the lady of the house is busy going to the hairdresser, manicurist or the mall, shopping label clothing, driving home in the latest *camioneta* (SUV). *Todo muy lindo* (all very nice, beautiful), but this is a culture of stupidity, of mindless consumption, of superficial beauty and living at face value. You can complain all you want about all the *negros* we have in this country, about the *chantas* and *chorros* in the political establishment, but these people with shit for brains are *perjudicando* (causing harm, damaging) the country and our culture just as much. They might feel they live very privileged lives, but they are just another element of the things that are going wrong with this country. They have no sense of culture, of the values that matter and the regard for the knowledge, enlightenment and common sense that has to be the corner stones of this country if we ever want to improve. And by improving I don't mean making accessible this lifestyle for everyone, on the contrary. I am talking about *educación* (education and level of culture), *modales* (manners), *respecto* (respect), *honestidad* (honesty) and seeing that we have to start valorising what we have ourselves; not desperately embracing whatever is spewed out from United States."

Dora's emotional critique of what she sees as lamentable characteristics of her own society is neither typical nor unusual among *profesionales*. Many of similar background and socioeconomic position would surely see things differently, and, these are indeed among the people she refers to. Pitted against the importance she always places on education, and the instruction of what to her are sustainable values, she calls on a morality of responsibility as she did with the socially differently conceptualised practices of the *negro*. Again she repudiates the misguided indulgence in unfamiliar and imported practices, focusing on the illegitimacy of this indulgence as explained by a lack of appreciation. The lifestyles she depicts are made morally compromised, as the rhetoric pits a range of elements against what is clearly important and of value to her. Some informants may indulge in some of the practices she refers to and at the same time join in the criticism of others. In other words, *there is no homogenous or clearly defined gamut of practices and preferences subjected to the disapproval*. I have already emphasised the contextuality with which practices meet their moral judgment, the other determinant factor, is the actor.

Currency and value

It has been suggested that in the modern western world, there is a crisis in the markets wherein symbolic values are assigned to conventional social and cultural forms. This crisis can be regarded as

overthrowing of old hegemonies, and the emerging forms are identified in their plurality, their schizophrenia (Jameson, 1985), their ambiguity, and meaninglessness - "an anti-system which promotes the articulation of difference as an end in itself" (Hebdige, 1988:163).

One aspect that might be identified as causing market crisis for symbolic goods, a crisis of representation (Harvey, 1989), is the deluge of signs, or currency, flooding these markets. If certain commodities are made too accessible, the possession of them will ultimately be devaluated. Lowering of requirements and thus facilitating broader access is also a devaluation of the symbolic capital previously held in the exclusivity associated with access. This refers particularly in the educational system (Bourdieu, 1984), certain professions, even social clubs and organisations. This is particularly theorised with regards to the post-modern occidental world (see Pfeil, 1988, 1990; Featherstone 1989, 1991; Lash and Urry 1987; and Betz, 1992).

How does this correspond to our case? I have already commented on the missed trajectories that aids in explaining some of the cultural idiosyncrasies of this nation. As such, porteños live in a world somewhat betwixt and between (Turner, 1969) the hegemonies of yore and the contemporary western urban climate that for some translates to the: "ontological freedom which is gained when the standard social hierarchies, ideologies and the deeply conventionalised politics and morality that characterised a previous cultural era are dissolved under the steady process of consumer and social democratisation that have occurred since the Second World War" (Lee, 1993:164).

However, my informants do not live in a non-state of experience characterised by social phenomena void of meaning. They do not find themselves in an ontological vertigo not knowing how to navigate between convention and change. In fact, they produce meaning, and they live through convention and change. What has been a line of argument, however, is that the meaning they produce is to a certain extent contingent upon and guided by socially located moral discourses; legitimising and condemning life projects and social practices, which in turn fortify and consolidate this discourse. These are processes of production of difference (Gupta and Ferguson, 2000), and processes defining the dynamics of attributing meaning to the unfamiliar. As such, I argue that representations of the new are met with very foundational tools with which informants create meaning of ambiguous and extraneous phenomena, or in some cases, new meaning from existing ones, depending on the social connotations evoked by modifications in practice, e.g., the appropriation by other social segments erstwhile excluded.

The notion of currency has both quantitative and qualitative aspects. Quantitatively it refers to the increased accessibility of commodities, or popularisation of practices and preferences. The

devaluation of symbolic capital refers in this case to it no longer being exclusive or a scarce good (Bourdieu, 1984). Qualitatively, it refers to the emergence of new forms meaningfully ambiguous. Here, the matter cannot be that of devaluation, as it has yet to be ascribed value subsequently subjected to amortisation. The concern in this case is that of attributing meaning to it, and ultimately value.

The case of the stylistically unconventional represented by unfamiliar fashion and design (as in the men's department at Zara) represents such a case. We saw how a temporary category was deployed in confirming its discomfiting unfamiliarity (*mamarracho*), how this was contextually conditioned (origin precluding local socially derogatory category), and how by means of association an imagery was evoked to link it with contemporary cultural forms (the *machopostmo*). This demonstrated the flexibility with which socio-cultural categories are deployed in fixing meaning on a phenomenon, achieving some clarity, or grasping intelligibly what it may stand to symbolise. Antagonism and affinity certainly affect the way in which categories are invoked, deployed and manipulated, leaving the interpreting informant to practice with confidence her familiarity with the categories, and the meaning they convey for her. As such, *social meaning is created within the latitude of what a broader affinity, rooted in personal or group values, can be made to legitimise.*

Based on the analysis, I suggest that at least two factors must be considered in ascribing symbolic value to a practice or a commoditized aesthetic. We have seen that affinity with places of elsewhere and the imagination of these places play a part. Furthermore, an aesthetic is also judged on the basis of local concepts, evoked by categories mediating the imagery of a perceived lifestyle and the moral woes and virtues connoted by the social practices of this lifestyle. By evoking the imagery of a status group constructed through discourse as sharing in values, beliefs and practices, there exists in this socio-cultural segment a locus wherein the recognition is exerted by virtue of its experiential and aesthetic homogeneity.

Calling the bluff and 'seeing things as they really are'

Moral discourses create, as seen in chapter 8, a sense of 'seeing the world as it really is' (and as it should be), i.e., a normatively infused way of perceiving reality. This worldview or social optic, is exerted by informants full aware that it is not shared in the broader society; certainly not among other classes, and sometimes not even among close friends 'temporarily labouring under illusions', as in the case of María's reflection on Guada and her current relationship with Leo. The practical and

habitual efficacy of this optic is the ability to not take alternative or emergent forms seriously.

Deauthenticating the project of the autodidact, the not formally trained musician, the chef-to-be etc, is the process whereby the symbolic economy is emphasised in what is deemed illegitimate.

The manifestations of some of these new forms, practices and expressions have been theorised extensively by other scholars, trying to sum up the objectifications - practical and aesthetic manifestations - of the fluidity and intangibility of the concept of the post-modern. Exemplified are new professions, new careers, new trends, new aesthetics and so on. Bourdieu argues how these processes, quasi-forms and inventing of new professions, needs, marketing angles, art forms, trends with discourses on itself as a cultural form deceiving intellectuals into endorsing it, are processes of self-valorisation undertaken by mostly individuals from the petit bourgeoisie and individuals in social descent from higher up in the social structure. Their project is seen as staking out a course arriving at a place beyond social classification, i.e., to render itself too complex for conventional categories and social taxonomies, or to be fixed or tied down in unambiguous meaning and commonsense.

Bourdieu has outlined the emergence of these new social formations in what he calls the new bourgeoisie and the new petit bourgeoisie. Feeling that the new bourgeoisie embody the ideal manifestation of a new social consciousness, drawing its character from both economic and cultural resources equally, it is made to be:

"the instigator of the ethical retooling required by the new economy from which it draws its power and profits, whose functioning depends as much on the production of needs and consumers as on the production of goods. The new logic of the economy rejects the ascetic ethic of production and accumulation, based upon abstinence, sobriety, saving and calculation, in favour of a hedonistic morality of consumption, based on credit, spending and enjoyment. This economy demands a social world which judges people by their capacity for consumption, their 'standard of living', their lifestyle, as much as by their capacity for production". (Bourdieu, 1984:310)

There is a striking relation between this passage and the informant observation submitted at the beginning of the chapter. For the informant, the management of this economic capital is done in a manner undermining its symbolic value. As it contradicts self-valorised concepts of sobriety, prudence, work ethic, saving and modesty, the foundations for recognition of the objectified capital is eroding dramatically. What can be interpreted from the informant's account is that capital normally subjected to recognition, if generally associated with lifestyles and practices to which there is attached negative value, will in its objectified form as signs become devalued symbols. For example, disparate and otherwise unconnected signs like a Jeep Grand Cherokee, a Polo shirt, a set of golf clubs, a personal trainer, children at a bilingual college or a maid in a uniform, might offset a process

of imagination where the aggregate of all these signs will figure and constitute the classification. Of course, we do know that there often is a correlation between such elements as listed above, and one often comes with the other to make up an objectively observable stylisation of life. On the other hand, we also know that informants create meaning at a distance, drawing on selected associations and imagination; the accumulation of experience, consolidated impressions and reflection that constitute their, at any moment, current way of 'seeing things the way they really are'.

Making sense; symbolic capital and a system of relevancies

Methodologically contemplating the distribution of knowledge throughout society, Schutz spoke of ideal types symbolising generalised ways of seeking out or being dependant upon information; 'the man in the street', 'the citizen who aims at being well informed' and 'the expert', prone to solicit type and quantity of information in accordance with what is needed for the task or situation at hand. The 'man in the street' makes good with the 'recipe knowledge' that answers to naïve relevance (a baker does not need to know about the particular chemistry of yeast to make a bread, and hardly ever the recipe), the well-informed citizen will extract specific ad-hoc information for a certain occasion (like party policies ahead of an election) and the expert will seek out profound and esoteric information, like a researcher wanting to achieve fundamental understanding (but to a degree predefined by the relevant problems of the field). If not all, then clearly most people perform all these roles at some point in their lives, contextually selecting information based on the relevancies suggested by the occasion or problem at hand.

We can draw on this concept of relevancies in theorising the process by which the categories for classification are selected and derived, keeping the focus on the concept of symbolic capital.⁷⁷ Informants classify their own society; other social groups, friends and people they know. They do this based on the others' actions, articulated views and objectified preferences. They classify during, or immediately after a social encounter, i.e., based on firsthand observation, and they classify at a distance by means of imagination and expectation. Classification is a structuring process, an act of cognition whereby we fix meaning on many of the countless phenomena we continuously encounter in daily life. Daily life requires a knowledge that is attuned to the immediacy with which phenomena occurs. I do not wish to compare this case material with any of Schutz' ideal types; the selection process is our main concern. In what we have presented of informants' subjective understanding and interpretation of practices and preferences, they are invariably invoking categories that by opposition

reflect their symbolic capital. The normative aspect of judging practices or situations, has been documented in what is submitted of informants' reflections and reasoning. I suggest that this aspect makes itself relevant in moments of perceiving others and the practices and preferences of others, as this perception is not an analytical thought process but a knee-jerk response to what is valued by the perceiver. This means that in perceiving and classifying others, either in social contact or by imagination, informants use a system of relevancies based on the situation or phenomenon at hand. *The relevancies are determined by the elements that clearly and unambiguously create a response, either of affinity or antagonism, and find their expression in a category.* Consider again how this relates to Bourdieu:

“The foundation for the principle of relevance that perception of the social world carries into effect... ..is nothing else than the interest the individuals or groups in question have in recognising one or the other feature and the observed individuals belonging to the entirety which is being defined by this feature. The interest for what is noticed is never independent of the interest to see this. This is clear regarding classifications that are constructed around a stigmatised feature, which ... isolates the interesting from all other features...which are returned to the grey mass of everything insignificant and therefore is viewed as one and the same.” (Own translation) (1995:232)

This is how a simple act can be deemed as *cosa de negro*; something (an act, utterance or gesture within a broader social context like a situation) explicitly in opposition to the dialectic of values and practices reflecting the symbolic capital of a certain group, will instantly be perceived as such based on *that* particular manifestation which created the response. Having identified the either normatively or aesthetically offensive, it is, if perceptually familiar, assigned a category denoting what it symbolises, and at the same time giving testimony to the symbolic capital authoring and authorising this classification. We saw in the case of fixing meaning on an unfamiliar aesthetic, the relevancies didn't render themselves immediately obvious, as the expression did not create an instant response. What was relevant was the location, precluding a certain kind of categories.

Implications of distance: classificatory comfort

The increased spatial segregation taking place in and around contemporary Buenos Aires, manifest in differentiated and discriminated recreation, education and residential patterns (Sarlo, 1994), contributes to the perpetuation of these class-based mental constructs of classification. With the

conceptualised position in the social structure adheres a set of imageries associated with different social groups. These social groups, or classes, are in their disenfranchisement and deprived access to the various elements that constitute the new lifestyles, figuring as imageries and constructs in the structure of social knowledge about other social fields. They are conceived of from a distance, and remaining at a distance, as they are not participating in the same process of capital converting as do other social groups. The physical distance characterising the social space wherein socially heterogeneous (inter)action supposedly would take place, contributes effectively to tenacious conceptions about the practices and preferences of the others (Caldeira, 1999).

The spatial segregation and its effect on social polarisation in Latin America is a spiralling development (Holston, 1989). It is hard to imagine how the spreading and consolidation of this social form will in any way generate alternative modes of empathetic understanding of the other. If we were to except that people see their society not in flux, but as lasting structures (Stuchlik and Holy, 1981), than certainly the structures of social classification, the foundations for the principle of perception of which Bourdieu spoke, are kept stable and less subjected to challenge, as imageries about “the other” persist across a social space increasingly pervaded and characterised by physical (and thus social) disconnection and distance.

Although taking for granted of otherness - assuming difference instead of focusing on production of difference - remains a methodological problem for anthropology (Gupta and Ferguson, 2000), we cannot fail to recognise that this naturalised difference exists as a social fact in folk models and local social classification when they are indeed our study matter. My informants rarely closely interact with individuals from the highest or lowest strata in the social structure. This does not imply that these groups are not subject to social classification, on the contrary, they are most easily classified by imagination; how they dress, talk, live, think, organise their lives and place importance on things.

Social contact complicates the issue of classification, not the other way around. Provided there already exists a stock of knowledge, an aggregate of truths, a census of representation, this classified structure made tangible and intelligible by imageries, is constituted and legitimised through discourses specific to one or several fields. From the point of view of social knowledge, distance is comfort.

10

By ways of concluding

The porteño character is, if anything, contextual. It can relate to a vast array of practices and stereotypes, but not all together. To some extent it transcends social constructions like classes; porteño is about practices and orientations more so than socio-economic standing. It does however preclude some ethnic connotations, as it relates only to Hispanic or Caucasian background. The intermetropolitan urbanity associated with porteño cosmopolitanism, has invariably found its conceptual ground and actual premise in modernity; a modernity as defined by unprecedented cultural flows of goods and practices, allowing for the elsewhere to take part on home soil. The latest deluge of practices and goods to make its impact on porteño lives came as a consequence of neoliberal economical policies measured out and implemented at the beginning of 1990's.

Profesionales are a status group, increasingly an upper middle class segment to whom the new economic structures are well suited, and wherein they find themselves faced with the offer of porteño cosmopolitanism. Almost a century ago this was an elite privilege, but when modernity reintroduced itself, and opened the door for a reinvention of porteño cosmopolitanism, wide social segments across the middle classes could construct and stylise their lives in a way hitherto impossible, much in the mould of Northern American upper middle classes.

It has been the argument of this text, and one I hope able to have shown, that the manifestations of modernity are just one flow of goods and practices that need to have meaning attributed them. In order to relate to other social agents, other practices or preferences, it must be attributed social meaning, i.e., it has to be associated with a social segment. As such, modernity as cultural flows, finds itself integral of two processes of social classification. First, it reiterates social distinction and inequality in its differentiated cultural reception, secondly, it rearticulates social distinction by means of discourses of symbolic capital, as objective differences are becoming less obvious. As this symbolic capital is found in what is habitually self-valorised within social segments, and in the case of individuals, conventional discourses of morality and taste are deployed to effectively question or affirm the illegitimacy of a lifestyle or an indulgence. This logic clearly corresponds to the notion of conversion of capital.

Many *profesionales* feel justified in this social structure. Their long term educational investments

and the affluent but prudent lifestyle has through valorisation been made constitutive of their symbolic capital, and in a discourse of due rewards, these are the focal points that legitimise and explicate social difference. However, observations are made among informants, that *profesionales* also are losing a grip on their designated reality, and all rather to hedonistically and uncritically embracing a romance with indulgence from elsewhere. The conceptual locus for this logic is found between the ideas, or moralities of self-improvement and knowing one's social place.

Finally, what is the meaning of taste and moralities in social classification among porteños? This constitutes a set of discourses with differentiating and empowering agency. We have seen how displays are deemed in terms of the taste (the preferences of a social segment) they denote. These categories of taste are linked to moral categories in a language of class. For example, when *grasa* relates to *negro*, or when *cheto* relates to *cholulo*, there is a moral judgment of social practices, as encapsulated by the ephemeral display, which constitutes it in the imagery of social class. This imagery figures in flexible and readily invoked discourses explicating, condoning or condemning the practices of others, and at the same time legitimising one's own practices; practices and construction of lives which is unquestionably evident and contributing to the proliferation of the spiralling social segregation taking place throughout the society.

Notes

1 The remaining two aspects of this tripartite critique question the conflation of globalisation and westernisation, focusing on cultural flows going the other way as well, or from periphery to centre according to certain terminologies, and, emphasise the periphery flows, i.e., cultural influence between countries outside the western industrialised realm. For a further discussion of this see Inda and Rosaldo (2002).

2 I see 'transnationalism' befitting the text, as Argentina constitutes a case where cultural imports are brought from one dominant place at a time, depending on the epoch. As such I am going with a definition of transnationalism that can be traced to Mintz (1998) and Kearney (1995)

3 I refer to symbolic violence as does Richard Jenkins (2002) analysing Bourdieu; all institutionalised power that coercively without physical violence or terror generate, enforce and reproduce social forms.

4 This is but one definition of the phenomena, however, one that will form the basis for its use throughout the text.

5 Another, but largely similar way of conceptualising the perception that underlies cultural understandings and social classification, is what many cognitive scholars refer to as schemas (Bourdieu speaks of classificatory schemas, but make these inherent to the habitus which accounts for more than perception and consequent classification). Quinn and Strauss explain:

"...cultural understandings are simply schemas that have to come to be shared to a greater or lesser extent without being human universals. The essence of schema theory is that our thoughts and actions are not directly determined by features of the external world but are mediated by learned prototypes. These prototypes, or schemas, are the generic versions of experience that remain in memory. Such prototypes have an expectational force: When a present experience or a memory of past events has missing or ambiguous information, we may not be aware of this, because our schemas, if unmodified by new evidence to the contrary, will fill in these blank or "grey" areas." (Strauss and Quinn, 1994:285)

Parallels to the concept of the habitus are decisively present in Quinn and Strauss' own model of connectionist theory, and it draws as such significantly on theory like that of Bourdieu when conceptualising schemas that are

"...well-learned but do not dictate an unvarying pattern of behaviour. They can adapt to new or ambiguous situations with "regulated improvisation". ... The responses that are the output of connectionist networks are improvisational because they are created on the spot, but regulated because they are guided by previously learned patterns of association; they are not improvised out of thin air." (1994:287). On the formation of concepts, classificatory devices by which we perceive, Bloch writes that

"...such concepts are formed through reference back to rather vague and provisional "prototypes" which anchor loosely formed "families" of specific instances. For example, the concept of a house is not list of essential features which have to be checked off before deciding whether or not the thing is a house...we consider something as "a house" by comparing it to a loosely associated group of house-like features, no one of which is essential, but which are linked by a general idea of what a typical house is" (Bloch, 1994:277) Here I regard Bloch at odds with Bourdieu as he downplays the importance of one or more essential features.

6 This is a sharing based on various kinds of similar and common experience. Schemas *unique* to individuals are built up from idiosyncratic experience:

"At what point in the continuum of sharedness we decide to call a given schema "cultural" is simply a matter of taste...Cultural models are in people's heads, but a given cultural model need not be in everyone's head... an individual might share schemas with as many different groups of other individuals as he or she shares a history of membership - at the same time sharing all of his or her schemas with no one else in any of these groups."

(Strauss and Quinn, 1994:293) This makes a point about the differentially distributed cultural understandings or knowledge constituted by certain perceptions. It falls in line with the broader argument to which I subscribe, namely that perception is not homogeneously calibrated in the broader society, that there are concepts and categories that hold similar meaning within certain groups exhibiting similarities of various kinds, others that refer to phenomena perceived differently as a result of being valorised differently, and even concepts or categories unknown to large segments within a society wherein it supposedly operates.

7 How can we view these theories of perception in relation to production of meaning arising from social interaction? This calls into questions to what extent meaning is negotiated or arrived at through the exchanges between individuals. Layton writes that

"Schutz used the term 'intersubjectivity' to describe the condition in which we experience the world as something whose significance we share with others...To intuit the subjective meanings another person attributes to the world, we try to imagine the 'project' in which the other is engaged yet, to the extent that our previous experiences differ, we can never fully achieve intersubjective understanding. 'I ascribe to you an environment which has already been interpreted from my subjective standpoint' (Schutz 1972:105)" (Layton, 1997:191) The last sentence might refer both to an informant and a researcher. In the case of the informant, it is according to Bourdieu a case of classification (1977), i.e., the workings of a perception that will attribute subjective meaning to the preferences, statements, gestures and actions of the other. We recognise here what Bourdieu refers to as common classification following or answering to the logic of prejudice (Bourdieu, 1984). Schemas or habitus are most certainly the products of familiar milieus or even practiced roles; stable, long term and recurrent interaction facilitates another understanding of the other, but it is an understanding based on an identification with the other's project, as it is very likely similar to that of oneself. In contrast, perceptions or even ideas (often in the guise of prejudice and stigmatisation) about groups with whom we are seldom or never in contact are perpetuated in that the distance precludes our discoveries of, or surprises at, the discrepancy between perception based on

non-experience and what is revealed by actual experience. "Fleeting, superficial encounters are likely to preclude any such surprises to existing interpretations. Such encounters typically result in much missing and ambiguous information, which is then interpreted on the basis of previously learned expectations, reinforcing these expectations". (Strauss and Quinn, 1994:290) It is my provisional opinion that existing schemas or habitus have a decisive bearing on the experience of any social encounter, and that the durability of these structures must be seen in close relation to the social movement of the individual, i.e., the observable patterns of relationships and contacts with which he or she enters into social exchange. Again, I must reiterate that structures of classification and perception enabled by the habitus are not cast in stone, people are not completely unimpressionable, however, the habitual social patterns might provide an indication as to the probability and plausibility of certain newfound orientations, leanings or susceptibilities.

8 For a discussion on the construction of narratives and their meaning as qualitative data, I refer to Coffey and Atkinson (1996)

9 As Buenos Aires became a mediator between the riches of the Pampas and the capital forces from outside, the port was the centre of all activity related to finance, export and imports. With the emergence of air cargo, after decades of economic demise and the more natural harbours other places on the continent, the port of Buenos Aires is no longer known for high intensity commercial activity. As such, great parts of it were just waiting to be renovated and redeveloped during the 1990's. This only happened in the downtown area. The harbour sections to the south of the city, in the poorer barrio of La Boca remain a depressing sight, with wreckage and a stench of sewage the most notable features.

10 Product diversification has always been an Achilles heel of the Argentinean export industry as exports have always been centred on a few basic agricultural produce, such as wheat, beef and soy, to mention the most typical. The problem of diversification has persisted with the country the entire 20th century, and was particularly pronounced after WW 2, when Argentina was cut off from the wheat export markets to Europe, as these countries were made to import wheat from United States as part of the Marshall Plan agreement.

11 Some 39% of the great immigration wave of this time came from the poorer areas of south Italy, about 32% were of Spanish decent, mainly from the north west of Galicia. The rest made up various minorities; Germans, French, English, Scandinavians, Russians, Polish and Arabic of different Middle East areas (see Archetti, 1999; Shumway, 1991 and Rock, 1985).

12 "The...*conventillos*, two-storey rectangular constructions with Spanish-style patios in their interiors, had half a century earlier been the residences of the rich. But as they moved out after the epidemic of the early 1870's, the buildings were acquired by speculators, some of whom later constructed similar new buildings. The *conventillos* had been designed to accommodate a single extended family in some style. In the early years of the 20th century they had become slums, with one dwelling occupied by as many as a score of families." (Rock, 1985) Many of these buildings remain in barrios such as San Telmo, in areas where the colonial architecture, even though badly maintained, still prevails. The greater mansions and town houses built by the elite after they left the southern *barrios*, are easily encountered in the zones of Recoleta, Palermo and Belgrano. It is worth noting that in discourse of respectability as performed among informants, *conventillo* also refers to gossiping, clearly alluding to the image of a great number of people in a cramped place with little to do but talking among themselves, about others.

13 Of course, to conclude that working class did not have an offer in recreational entertainment would be wrong. Donna Guy's (1998) historical analysis of prostitution in Buenos Aires offers an insight into this query.

14 In an article about the landowning elite in Argentina between the 1880's and the 1945, Roy Hora (2002) has observed that some of them diversified their activities with real estate investments and banking.

15 The stylisation of life among the porteño elite was heavily French, or Parisian inspired; architecture, social habits, dress sense, literature et cetera. Industrial enterprise on the other hand was exclusively linked to the British; their ideas, materials, investment capital and engineers.

16 Economically, trouble was looming already around 1915, as transatlantic trade came to a complete standstill during the first years of WW1, and Argentina's dependence on overseas market access was pronounced as poignantly as never before. Political instability manifested itself in 1930 with the first military overthrowing of a democratically elected government. Severe social unrest was not surfacing until the 1940's with union conflicts becoming more violent, however, a tightening labour market and fallen standards of living had already seen the rise of many unions, strikes and violence (Rock, 1985)

17 After WW, British investment ceased in Argentina, and links were waning. Argentina had shifted to United States as its main trade partner, heavily dependant on import of manufactured goods from USA. Argentina remained dependant on the British though for export earnings (Rock, 1985).

18 By 1930 there were 435000 automobiles throughout Argentina, a substantially higher number than in most western European countries, and a sevenfold increase from 8 years earlier (Rock, 1985).

19 From 1914 to 1930, the population rose from 7.9 to 11.6 million (Rock, 1985).

20 *Union Civica Radical* emerged as a ruling party after 1890. Its first leader, Hipolito Irigoyen was elected president in 1916 after the first national elections under universal male suffrage, but ejected 2 months into his second term by the coup d'etat of September 1930 (Luna, 2000). *Los Radicales* have traditionally has a strong base among middle classes in

the city of Buenos Aires, and over the 20th century, they have represented an alternative, at least in name, to nationalists, conservatives and Peronists respectively.

21 Peron held various positions in the military government of Farrell from 1943, establishing himself as the coming, and strong man, as oppose to the mere figurehead that was Farrell. It was not until Peron turned to the workers and their unions that he found the vast base that could form the support he was after. Through a series of public spectacles where he associated himself with the workers, as well as granting them benefits from the helm at the labour ministry, he made the unions and the popular masses close allies to whom he later could turn (Luna, 2000).

22 Most intellectuals whose work and continuous observations I have read are far from celebratory in their reflections over her accomplishments. Eva Peron continually enjoys the status of a popular saint in Argentina, mainly throughout working class segments. Among *profesionales*, she is widely held to have been a manipulative and obsessively ambitious and hateful woman who did significantly more damage than good.

23 The United States demanded a full embargo on Argentina from western European countries during and after WW2, and did in no subtle ways indicate what they regarded Argentinean sympathies to be during the war. Peron's relationship with fascism is evident however, seen in his methods of propaganda, oppression of political adversaries and nationalistic/populist rhetoric. It is often commented that Peron had been stationed for several years in Mussolini's Italy, as an officer connected to the embassy.

24 The traditional and liberal broadsheet *La Prensa* was several times harassed by Peron; restricted, closed and banned over his combined time in office (Luna, 2000).

25 Peron had also lost the support of the Catholic Church, a force to be reckoned with for any leader, as the church had a broad base throughout society, mainly among the popular masses, the nationalistic segment of the elite and the military (see Burdick, 1996).

26 Robberies, assassinations and bombings were performed by different groupings of subversives, but referred to as the most notorious and feared became that of *Los Montoneros*, the unification of various youth Peronist groups, radical in ideology and spiteful towards the impotency of the traditional 'left' forces as seen both in politics and among the labour unions. Most of its members were middle class students or recent members to the professions, often from affluent families.

27 The official numbers state that around 9000 disappeared during 'the dirty war', whereas unofficial estimates, like that of various human rights organisations, claim more than 30000 were abducted and killed by the military rule.

28 In charge of the military political rule in 1982 was Galtieri, one of the nation's most denounced men who died in house arrest this year, widely accused of having decided on the invasion spontaneously during one of his many and lasting drinking sprees.

29 Relations between Argentina and Great Britain remained tense for many years, but were alleviated under Menem, and continuously mending. Much bitterness over the war is directed towards the military leadership who largely remained unscathed, retiring with privileged pensions, whereas thousands of young conscripts, many with hardly any training at all, were effectively sent to their death. Those permanently mutilated and incapacitated have received little if any support from the state afterwards. What resentment that is directed against the British with reference to the Falklands, relates to the sinking of *The Belgrano*, a destroyer that was allegedly only used for transport of personnel and material.

30 Again under civilian rule, military leaders of the junta and individuals involved in the abductions and torture of *desaparecidos* were handed out prison sentences of various lengths. Menem's amnesty to a number of the military leaders, overturning their sentences from imprisonment to house arrest resulted in public outcries in 1990.

31 Partido Justicialista, the term is traced back to the days of Peron, when his programme for distribution and social welfare was ideologically fronted as the only viable road to social justice.

32 There are surely a number of definitions on this phenomenon in circulation, and no doubt some of them relate better to certain parts of the world than others, as historical trajectories provide local conditions that differ. Very basically, neoliberalism refers to economic liberalism, and a rebooting of these policies. If we were to list a few characteristics usually associated with this process, and not exempt in the case of Argentina, the most salient are the rule of the market (liberating "free" enterprise or private enterprise from any bonds imposed by the government), cutting public expenditure, deregulation (reduce government regulation on anything that could diminish profits), privatization (sell state-owned enterprises, goods and services to private investors. This includes banks, key industries, railroads, toll highways, electricity, schools, hospitals and even fresh water) and advocating a shift away from concepts of 'public good' or 'community' to notions of 'individual responsibility'.

33 A process of Fordism has been regarded as easing the passage into modernity in most western democracies on the northern hemisphere. The continuous process of a capitalism where industrial development is under heavy state surveillance and ownership, followed by partial, gradual and regulated privatisation, with the implementation and development of a welfare state and legislated protection for labour forces such as viable wages and rights to organise, has been a process whereby the working classes of these nation-states have been made mass consumers, and thus a force to be

reckoned with within the market, and instrumental in the reproduction of the social equilibrium. Of course this has severe ideological implications, most of which we will not discuss at present. However, the *déclassement* of these societies that has emerged as a result of the economic processes of distribution has also resulted in the politically liberal post-Fordist nation-states to open up the mass critique of itself, most manifest during the 60's and the 70's in the form of direct confrontation against political, economical and intellectual establishments. From here on we have witnessed the grand-scale dissolving of cultural hegemonies and conventions in social forms, norms and codes. Under the formal guarantor of diversity that is democratic stability (which is not to say that diversity is a feature of all democratic societies), we have in the last four decades in these societies seen a gradual process whereby the intensification of poly-cultural, hybridised forms and expressions and cultural contestation and subculture come to make up a continuity of changed social realities (De Certeau, 1984). These forms, or rather the familiarisation of these forms, make the essence of what has been referred to as "the post-modern structure of feeling" (Williams, 1962 and Pfeil, 1988), "'a community of experience', internalised and rearticulated as cultural practice and consciousness" (Lee, 1993:164). This opening up of cultural forms as it were, has witnessed particularly in the northern occidental world the emergence and establishment of a multitude of subcultures, underground movements in music, literature, cinema and fashion, and apart from the obvious commodity access facilitated by the increasingly globalised economy of flexible accumulation, there has also been a diffusion of cultural forms. This diffusion is seen in the transcultural spectacles of appropriation and consumption of alien customs, whether they are foods, garments, dances, ontological ideas or forms of therapy and exercise. The worldwide spread of yoga, Kamasutra, tango, salsa, sushi, carnivals et cetera can all be seen as measuring the pressure in the barometer of cultural diffusion, and for some, this diffusion is the essence of post-modern transnational culture.

34 Notable examples are London, Liverpool and Toronto.

35 Similar to the French *hypermarchées*, these constructions are basically enormous supermarkets. In Argentina, different chains, mostly foreign ones, cater often to different social segments as prices vary. The French giant Carrefour is the cheapest one, the Chilean brand Jumbo is the priciest, but held to surpass the others in quality. Held in common by all the *hipermercados* is that they emerged during Menem's reign.

36 *Villas miserias* or *villas emergencias* started shooting up in the 1950's in the outskirts of Buenos Aires, housing urban marginals and unemployed migrants. Peron could do little about the rural source of the problem, and a publicly funded housing program was also unable to impede the proliferation of zones. By 1970, the shanty town population was reckoned at 750000 in the capital, perhaps double this number in Greater Buenos Aires (Rock, 1985).

37 Men usually take unskilled labour, a great number of them in construction. Women are mainly found in domestic services, working as maids in private homes.

38 Many of the public hospitals in and around Buenos Aires, are grand, monumental buildings that in their day and age must have represented the best medical treatment on offer, at least throughout Latin America. Now, at least the few I know, are in severe need of renovation and modernisation. *Profesionales* have nothing but praise for the medical staff at the public hospitals, claiming they do however work under unworthy conditions. Medical treatment is definitely avoided at these places, as most of the time will be spent queuing and going from one check point to another. Most *profesionales* have these stories confirmed whenever they need medical documentation that can only be issued by the public institutions, such as blood samples in connection with marriage.

39 The elections were held in May. Menem did run, indeed he won the first round, from where the top two candidates go into a second and decisive round. Just days before the second electoral round, Menem retired from the race, claiming political foul play in the forces that was joining up against him. The other Peronist candidate, Nestor Kirchner assumed the presidency.

40 Some sectors of the middle classes work in the informal sector inasmuch as they charge for services in cash and do not necessarily register the income. One such group is constituted by psychoanalysts, of which Buenos Aires famously have more of, per inhabitant, than any other city in the world.

41 Domingo Cavallo was the man behind measures such as pegging the peso to the dollar. Cavallo, a pragmatic transcending party boundaries, was brought back as minister of finance under the next government in charge, that of Fernando de la Rúa and the FREPASO alliance. Cavallo resigned during the riots of December 2001.

42 Maristela Svampa (2001) has conducted a sociological study of this lifestyle, as identified and located inside *barrios privados* and *countries*. The book is suggestively entitled *Los que ganaron* (Those who won). *Barrios privados* and *Countries* are gated communities of private housing estates, depending on terminology. Investors will buy a large area on the pampas from the landowner, gate it (high concrete walls) and dissect it into lots, much like a chess board. The lots are then put out for sale in connection with lavish billboards advertising a lush lifestyle along the highway or in glossy lifestyle magazines. People will buy these lots and build their, often huge, sometimes outright ostentatious houses there, seeing the area transforming into a neighbourhood where trees are planted, club houses are erected with adjacent swimming pools and tennis courts and football pitches. The most upscale ones will also feature golf courses and even polo fields. There is kept 24 hour watch at the gates by armed and uniformed security guards monitoring all movement in and out of

the area. *Countries* started emerging in the 1970's as fenced in forested areas wherein people could build houses on purchased land. They are somewhat different from the trend of the *barrio privados*, the latter being significantly more regulated, more densely constructed and more geometrically laid out. Even though *barrio privados* vary in exclusivity and status, they are overall residential phenomena to which a limited social segment has unproblematic access. They are also the residential representation of the social polarisation and communication of social ascent.

43 Carlos disclosed that he voted for Lopez Murphy, a liberal economist who came in 3 in the first round. Commentators observed that Lopez Murphy's base was made up by ex-Menem voters still placing their fate in liberal economic policies but not the corruptness or sheer health of Menem (well into his seventies by now), anti-Peronists who by default will pick any candidate over a Peronist (of which there are reportedly many in Argentina) and traditional voters for the *Radicales*, who hardly put together a campaign at all for their candidate Moreau.

44 As such, the concept of an identity can resemble that of an imagined community as described by Anderson (1983), or even, albeit on another level, the construction of an identity in prefabricated myths and histories forming the basis for ideas of nationhood (see Hobsbawm, 1983; Giddens, 1987 and Gellner, 1999)

45 Hailed as the nation's foremost literary personage, Borges, like other famous Argentinean cultural celebrities had an ambivalent relationship with his own country and his countrymen. He died in Switzerland, having lived many years abroad. He remains widely read both inside and outside of Argentina. In local discourse on Borges, indignation is felt on his behalf over not have one the Nobel prize of literature, something that is frequently explained by 'his conservative political orientation, whereas lesser writers like other Latin American winners were sure to please the leftist leanings of the Nobel Institute'.

46 A classic parallel here is the example of robbing a bank; in itself a wrong thing to do, but outside this normative framework, there is another coming into validity, namely the good and the bad way to go about it (Holy and Stuchlik, 1981).

47 The biggest broad sheet in Argentina, exclusive provider of printed daily news to be found in the *profesionales* homes I know.

48 Interestingly, many porteños of higher education still today refers to Sarmiento as the greatest mind and visionary in Argentinean political history. According to most of my informants, he did indeed design the civilisation of Argentina, by focusing efforts on mass scale education and immigration.

49 Thousands of Argentineans hold European passports as a result of European ancestry. Over the last years, more and more people have applied for this as it grants residence and work permits in Europe. It is interesting to contrast the fact that between 1850 and 1930, only 5 per cent of the millions of immigrants to Argentina filed for citizenship. As Rock puts it, they came for cash, not political influence (1985).

50 Most public services were privatised, telecommunications, roads, public transportation, the national airline, broadcasting networks and hospitals to mention but a few.

51 As English education is not mandatory in public schools, acquiring the language skills is often an individual and private endeavour, unless having attended bilingual colleges. It is becoming increasingly common that companies train their own employees, equipping them with the necessary communication skills for encounters with foreigners.

52 Compare with IVY league universities in USA or Oxbridge in England

53 There is a clear parallel here to the observations made by Bourdieu (1984) that a trait of nuclear families in social ascent is the limitation of social dependency, exchanges and solidarity with wider kin, in order to be able to channel efforts in accordance with social goals (1984)

54 Family as defined by law and constituted in popular social discourse do not always coincide. A negotiation of the family concept as undertaken in public discourse in western liberal democracies in alliance with modern legislation, is a process far from underway in Argentina. Same sex partners, unmarried couples or single parents with children do not answer to the concept of family.

55 This traditional barbecue is invariably a male preoccupation and responsibility across the nation. Originally associated with gauchos and the imagery of these the cowboys of the pampas, the existing gender roles have seen the *asado* become a male culinary preoccupation (see Tobin, 2002).

56 A trivial but noteworthy example nevertheless, in the daily talk show *Moria y vos* (Moria and you), invariably working class individuals and families are on stage in front of an audience to vent and act out their private disputes. Mothers on these shows, the ones well into their 20's and older, have rarely given birth to less than 4 children, often 6 or 7 (according to themselves).

57 I deem it safe to say that undertaking university studies assisted by the State Funding for Students does carry with it a stigma of social class in Norway.

58 Settling for unskilled labour, not wanting to improve on your situation, suggests a lack of ambition that ultimately is synonymous with mediocrity. Subsequently, informants are repeatedly baffled and shocked whenever they learn that many of their Norwegian counterparts do not hold any interest in university studies, and that we will rue the lack of social

difference that eventually breeds overall mediocrity.

59 Of course, there are troubled family histories where this intergenerational cohabitation over time has become impossible. Abuse, alcoholism, adultery, insanity or other sources of conflict will occur. It does however not alter the image of what is the general practice, and as such, convention, on this matter.

60 The more elaborate ones offer a range of rooms often with differently themed ambiance. Basic ones boast nothing more than what would go into a modestly decorated motel room; a ready-made bed, a bathroom with shower and bidet, mirrored ceiling (the outstanding factor) and a nightstand with a telephone. The customers most often enter with their car, asking for a room from the driver's seat, dealing with a person whose appearance will remain unknown as he sits in a boot behind reflected glass, operating through a small flap. Then the car is parked in the spot allocated by designated room. There are fitted plastic curtains designed and used for covering the car (and the license plate).

61 A national drink, not particularly associated with porteños, *mate*, or *yerba mate* is a grassy and bitter herbal drink, not completely unlike tea, often shared as passed around a group of people. Everyone will here share the same straw made out of silver.

62 As oppose to a Kantian aesthetic.

63 Compare with what Bourdieu notes (1984) on the petit bourgeoisie and how its members as employed below management level in the service sector devote more money and time in the physical appearance

64 Increasingly now after the devaluation.

65 Malls are referred to as *shoppings* by porteños. The first malls were inaugurated in the beginning of the 1990's reaping the fruits of a convertibility law that provided unprecedented economic stability and opened up for the full-scale import of modern and luxurious goods from most parts of the world, especially North America. With the malls arrived a new mode of consumption for porteños, a mode that would find its practice within these premises representing a permanent site for endless exhibitions of what was offered in lifestyle props and building blocks (Friedman, 2002). Guano notes on the porteño experience of the malls: "What struck porteños' imagination about the malls was their novelty as self-enclosed, streamlined, and sanitized structures single-mindedly devoted to consumption. As such, the malls were obviously at odds with the openness of the modern Buenos Aires of the turn of the century. However, in a paradoxical homage to the centralized organization of "Parisian" Buenos Aires, the most upscale among the porteño malls diverged from their North American suburban prototype by emerging in or around the city's *microcentro* (downtown)." (Guano, 2002:38) Informants echo to some extent the observations made by Guano, in that they regard a couple of the downtown malls more exclusive than others, maybe in particular the *Patio Bullrich*, situated in Recoleta. What makes some malls more upscale than others, though, is that they are more *caro* (expensive), i.e., they house a homogenous assembly of shops in terms of the price-range of commodities offered. In being *caro* follows the imagery of customers with whom my informants do not identify, e.g. the noted "ladies who lunch".

Regardless of exclusivity, malls have in common that they serve as *exhibitions*, as gazing is far more practiced than actually shopping. As Harris has suggested (1990), malls are places where institutional powers try to influence public knowledge and taste, much in the same way museums do, hence the concept of the museums of modernity. Baudrillard argued that we were made passive by the tyrannical imposition of new forms and commodities, if so, the malls might be seen to serve as the sites for imposition of these things as "museums of the New (Buck-Morss 1989). These would be 'places to visit with the disposition to learn what is trendy in New York, London and Paris. They are places where one can experience - see, smell, feel - an imported modernity that is irresistibly pretheoretical and synaesthetic (Appadurai 1996)'" (Guano, 2002).

66 There is an exception to this illustrated in chapter 8.

67 This term corresponds to what was earlier called *mersa*, a term still in use albeit among older generations.

68 Interestingly, Domingo Sarmiento, the man whose genius remains unquestionable among *profesionales*, was an autodidact. However, this, in *profesional* circles, only enhances his greatness.

69 Informants have pointed out to me that Argentina is the world largest importer of blond hair colour.

70 The largest tabloid in Argentina

71 Currently, USA are as unpopular as ever in Argentina, as many claim that the present administration symbolises very pronouncedly the arrogance and disrespect with which Argentina, as many other countries throughout the latter part of the 20th century have been imperialised and economically enslaved by US capital and foreign policies. The paradox being of course, that US manufactured goods have become the benchmark by which social success is measured.

72 As with everything else, she is prudent with her intake of caffeine, pointing to its insalubrious qualities. Health hazards may not be the reason for her general attitude of prudence, excessive eating and drinking she frequently refers to as *groseria*, a term meaning unrefined, vulgar and in bad taste.

73 I wished Wolfe and other observers, scholarly and others, would consider more closely that this solidarity is basically generated by fear - from the knowledge that a regulated and vigilant state will sanction failure to comply with the basics of the social, civil contract. As such, it is clearly stretching the semantic flexibility to interpret limited tax evasion as solidarity with perfect strangers.

74 The use of the casseroles quickly resulted in coining the proceedings as *caserolazos*.

75 About the judicial system, porteños know that this remains ideally, not so in reality.

76 Lexically, *humilde* denotes humbleness or living in material scarcity.

77 Les Luthiers is a legendary act in Argentina, an ensemble of musicians performing a musical/comedy act, with songs, stories, sketches and anecdotes. Although with many years in the business, they do, as I have understood, remain somewhat inaccessible to many people, and their shows are not the most popular ones.

78 Leo told me that he earns 800 pesos a month, which is decisively more than an ordinary industrial wage, which might be anything between 400 to 600 pesos. In comparison, recently educated *profesionales* usually stand to earn 1100-1300 pesos to begin with. An accountant in his 50's often makes anything between 3000 to 6000 pesos. 1 US dollar is currently a little less than 3 Argentinean pesos.

79 I decided not to comment that perhaps the statistic he referred to was one about newspapers.

80 I do not have any references on this, only personal experience and a general conception that friendship does indeed often constitute such a site in a number of other cultures, there among our own.

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