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1. Class Formation in the Barrios

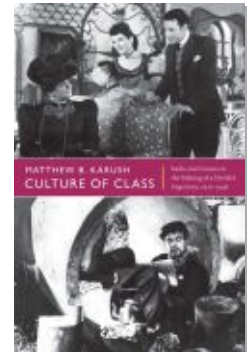
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I CLASS FORMATION IN THE BARRIOS

Los tres berretines (1933), one of Argentina's earliest feature-length sound films, is a comic meditation on modernization, consumerism, and mass culture. An opening montage of congested downtown streets set to jazz music establishes the film's setting in cosmopolitan, chaotic, ultra-modern Buenos Aires.¹ The camera then leaves the city center and enters one of the quieter outlying barrios. Here, the hubbub is created not by cars and pedestrians but by a group of kids playing soccer in the street. The camera settles on the exterior of a hardware store and then moves inside, where the owner, the Spanish immigrant Manuel Sequeiro, is helping two women interested in purchasing an electric bed warmer. The women are dissatisfied with the model the store owner shows them. It seems this apparatus is "vulgar," not at all like the ones they have seen in the movies and in magazines. Manuel declares that he doesn't sell "cinematic bed warmers" and angrily shoos the women out of his store. His bad mood worsens when the soccer ball the kids are playing with flies through the

front door, smashing into the merchandise. Cinema and soccer are, along with tango, the three *berretines*, or “popular passions,” of the film’s title. And like his store, Manuel’s value system has been upended by these new mass cultural practices and the desires they have awakened. As we soon learn, his wife and daughter have abandoned their domestic responsibilities in favor of frequent trips to the cinema with a male friend of dubious sexuality. One of his three sons wastes his days fantasizing about making it as a tango composer despite his complete lack of musical education, while another dreams of becoming a star soccer player. Meanwhile, the economic crisis of the period has dampened the prospects of his one worthy son, an unemployed architect whose financial difficulties are about to cost him his upper-class girlfriend. Manuel’s traditional values—hard work, patriarchy, education—seem suddenly useless, replaced by the consumerist titillation offered by movies, tango, and soccer. Yet the film offers a happy ending. Although denounced as “bums” by their father, both the tango composer and the soccer player find success. The latter becomes a star forward and convinces the management of his club to hire his architect brother to design the new stadium, thereby rescuing him from poverty and allowing him to marry his girlfriend. In the end, Manuel himself embraces the new mass culture, climbing a telephone pole in order to join thousands of fans cheering on his soccer-playing son.

Most obviously, *Los tres berretines* is about the quest for upward mobility: both Manuel’s commitment to work and education and his sons’ pursuit of success on the stage or in the stadium are strategies for improving one’s class position. But between these two paths from rags to riches, the film clearly sides with the pursuit of stardom, poking fun at both the immigrant’s faith in hard work and his pursuit of middle-class respectability. Lorenzo, the soccer-playing son, saves the day and Eduardo, the architect, gets the girl, but the star is unmistakably Luis Sandrini, who plays Eusebio, the would-be tango composer.² Spending the day hanging out in cafés, happily whistling his tango and being victimized by swindlers who promise to help him get it transcribed, Eusebio poses a clear alternative to the gospel of hard work and personifies mass culture’s promise of an escape from drudgery (see figure 1).³ Moreover, Eusebio’s success as a composer depends upon his rejecting pretentiousness and embracing plebeian tastes: when he pays a café poet to write lyrics for his tango, he rejects the first draft as too fancy and holds out for what the poet disdains as “pedestrian verses.” The result is “Araca la cana”



1 Luis Sandrini dreams of tango stardom as Eusebio in *Los tres berretines*. Courtesy of Museo del Cine Pablo Ducrós Hicken.

(“Look Out for the Cops”), a tale of frustrated love told almost entirely in lunfardo, the famously disreputable porteño slang. Similarly, the final, carnivalesque image of Don Manuel perched on the telephone pole outside the soccer stadium underscores the defeat of his apparently old-fashioned notions of respectability. Manuel has overcome his condescension toward Argentine mass culture; he has recognized the value and the beauty of both tango and soccer. If the third berretín is excluded from this happy resolution—Lorenzo’s soccer success “cures” his sister and mother of their unhealthy cinema addiction—it might well be because the movies being shown in Buenos Aires theaters in 1933 were overwhelmingly foreign productions. Like the cinematic bed warmer of the opening scene, these imports are merely the occasion for frivolous, unproductive consumption. By contrast, Argentina’s domestically produced mass culture is productive; it has reunited the Sequeiro family and en-

abled its immigrant patriarch both to reconcile himself to the modern world and to assimilate into the nation.

Los tres berretines must be understood in the context of a complex process of class formation under way in the Buenos Aires of 1933. During the preceding decade, dynamic economic growth and industrial development produced significant social mobility, a mushrooming consumer culture, and the rapid expansion of new barrios that were home to a heterogeneous population of blue- and white-collar workers as well as small business owners and professionals. But if these developments encouraged a blurring of class distinctions, *Los tres berretines* reveals forces pushing in the opposite direction. While Eduardo's commitment to hard work and education leaves him unemployed, his brothers succeed precisely by rejecting those values. This film, like so many other mass cultural products in these years, celebrates the cultural practices of Argentina's poor, not the diligence of its upwardly mobile architects. The movie's rags-to-riches narrative reads as escapist fantasy, a fantasy that spoke not to typical, middle-class values like hard work, education, and respectability, but to a sense of pride in Argentina's plebeian popular culture. The resonance and power of such populist messages in the mass culture of this period suggest that class-based identities persisted in these years.

This chapter will situate the emergence of Argentina's new mass cultural technologies and commodities within the context of the rapidly changing economic, political, and social conditions in Buenos Aires. Although the radio and cinema reached a massive audience throughout the country, both media targeted the capital city first and foremost. And in the rapidly growing barrios of Buenos Aires, class identity was very much in flux. Residents of these neighborhoods were the targets of various competing and contradictory messages: from commercial advertising's promises of upward mobility to the barrio improvement associations' paeans to progress and "culture," from the appeals to national unity favored by politicians to the labor movement's insistence on working-class solidarity. This was not a population that had sorted itself into rigid, class segments. Since mass cultural entrepreneurs needed to build an audience within this milieu, their radio programs and movies were influenced by existing discourses. Nevertheless, the fluidity of class identities in this period meant that the new mass culture would exert a profound influence of its own on the consciousness of porteños. During the 1920s

and 1930s, many porteños would follow the Sequeiro family in embracing a nation constructed in large part by mass culture.

MOBILITY AND ETHNIC INTEGRATION IN A TIME OF GROWTH

Beginning in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, Argentina experienced a vertiginous process of economic growth, demographic expansion, and modernization. The nation's insertion into an increasingly globalized economy as a major producer of wool, beef, and wheat led to impressive growth rates and massive immigration. Between 1875 and 1930, Argentina's population exploded from two million to twelve million, and its gross domestic product increased by a factor of 20. And despite its long-standing image as an essentially agrarian country, Argentina also achieved significant levels of industrialization in this period, both in sectors connected to the export business as well as in the production of consumer goods for the growing domestic market.⁴ By 1914, in fact, the industrial sector was the nation's largest employer, and 58 percent of the population lived in cities. The social and cultural transformations that accompanied these processes were dramatic to say the least, and nowhere were they more evident than in the city of Buenos Aires. Although the export boom of the late nineteenth century led to the rapid growth of several provincial cities, Buenos Aires dominated the nation's banking system, its import and export trade, and its nascent industrial sector.⁵ The political and economic primacy of the capital city imposed a severe limit on development elsewhere: by 1914 Greater Buenos Aires was home to 25 percent of the nation's population, a proportion that would continue to rise in subsequent decades.

Paradoxically, the massive scale of immigration to Argentina in this period may have facilitated a relatively rapid process of national integration. Historians have long questioned the popular image of the country as a melting pot, in which a national culture emerged magically from the blending of various European strains. Immigrants often preferred to marry people of the same ethnic and even regional background, and this preference likely slowed the process of assimilation.⁶ Moreover, regional and ethnic identities flourished in the host country, nurtured in part by an extensive network of ethnic mutual aid associations, clubs, newspapers, and other institutions. By 1925, for example, the Spanish commu-

nity in Buenos Aires enjoyed a total of 237 voluntary associations.⁷ Italians, the largest immigrant group in Argentina, did not lag far behind. In 1908 there were seventy-four Italian mutual aid societies in Buenos Aires with a total membership of more than fifty thousand.⁸ Nevertheless, these ethnic affiliations did not prevent the rapid Argentinization of the immigrant population. The fact that men always outnumbered women within the immigrant communities forced a great many Italians and Spaniards to marry Argentine women. And fragmentary evidence indicates that the Argentine-born children of immigrants tended not to take ethnicity into account when choosing a spouse.⁹

More important, immigrants in Argentina were not marginalized to the extent that they were in other host societies. This is not to deny that Argentine elites and intellectuals were often extremely xenophobic. During the early twentieth century, anarchist mobilization helped inspire a profound anxiety about the effects of immigration, and the state responded with repressive deportation measures and an intensely patriotic curriculum in the schools. Still, other, less coercive forces were at work. Unlike, say, New York City, Buenos Aires was never a city of ghettos. In fact, in 1910 the Argentine capital had one of the lowest average indices of ethnic segregation in the world, a pattern that continued as the city expanded.¹⁰ Similarly, immigrants in Argentina were far less likely to be relegated to certain occupations at the bottom of the social structure. The major immigrant groups were well represented among property owners and within the Argentine elite.¹¹

Even if the notion of a melting pot is too simplistic, the pioneering Argentine sociologist Gino Germani was probably right to argue that what might be seen as the assimilation of immigrants into a dominant culture is more accurately described as a process of cultural “fusion.”¹² Given the small size of the pre-immigration population, immigrants enjoyed a demographic dominance in Argentina that they lacked anywhere else. By 1914 foreign-born men outnumbered native-born men in Buenos Aires and several other cities. That same year, 80 percent of the Argentine population was composed of immigrants and the descendants of people who had immigrated since 1850.¹³ Although the country was home to significant communities of Russians, Poles, and Ottoman Turks, the majority of immigrants came from Italy and Spain. As a result, the religious, cultural, and even linguistic differences between immigrant and native populations were minimized. Immigrants could not, of course, reproduce

Old World societies in America, but they did fundamentally remake Argentine culture. This impact is partly visible in the many Italian and Spanish customs adopted as Argentine: the opera and the zarzuela, which dominated popular entertainment offerings in the early decades of the twentieth century, or the pasta, pizza, and *puchero* that continue to be staples of the local diet. But ethnic integration is perhaps even more obvious in what might be called cases of “invisible ethnicity.” The Podestá brothers, Uruguayan-born sons of Genoese immigrants, virtually invented the *circo criollo*, an enormously popular turn-of-the-century entertainment that celebrated the rustic talents and culture of the Pampas. Their ethnic origin posed no obstacle to their ability to play the role of quintessentially Argentine gaucho heroes like Juan Moreira. Similarly, when Argentine soccer teams played rivals from abroad, sports columnists saw the local players as representatives of a *criollo*, or native, style, regardless of their actual ethnicity. The Argentine club Provincia that faced a visiting Scottish team in 1928 included such surnames on its starting roster as Bearzotti, Talenti, Tornatti, and Lunghi, yet they were described by one reporter as “a team of native boys (*muchachos criollos*).”¹⁴

In truth, ethnic identity had not disappeared, so much as it had been relativized. Immigrants continued to be the butt of jokes as they had been since the late nineteenth century, when the character of Cocoliche was created in order to ridicule Italian newcomers for their broken Spanish and their desperate efforts to assimilate. But by the turn of the century, cocoliches were clowns whose participation was required in any enactment of *criollo* or native culture; the presence of an Italian immigrant now lent authenticity to representations of the nation.¹⁵ Similarly, making fun of immigrants was the central comic ploy of the *sainete*, the short play that dominated porteño theater in the early decades of the twentieth century. Increasingly, though, this humor had a gentle, lighthearted tone. By the 1920s many *sainetes* depicted the embarrassment that the children of immigrants felt for the awkward and old-fashioned customs of their parents.¹⁶ By laughing at these jokes, audiences were not only teasing immigrants; they were also endorsing the assimilationist project of the second generation. *Los tres berretines*, which originated as a *sainete*, reveals the same attitude: Manuel Sequeiro is comically out of touch with current Argentine popular culture, but successful assimilation requires only that he learn to love the soccer and tango music of his sons. In the 1920s immigrants continued to be targets for xenophobic, nationalist

intellectuals as well as for playwrights pursuing an easy laugh, but their children were widely seen as Argentine. Ethnic affiliations persisted, as the vitality of Italian and Spanish mutual aid associations attests, but they did not block the emergence of more inclusive, hybrid forms of national identity.

Immigration came to an abrupt halt in 1930, when the international Depression began to take a significant toll on the Argentine economy. The end of the era of massive immigration reinforced the declining significance of ethnic division, as the proportion of foreigners in the Argentine population fell from 40 percent in 1930 to 26 percent in 1947.¹⁷ But economic developments continued to reshape the population of Buenos Aires. Although the interruption of international trade reversed nearly a decade of strong economic growth, the Argentine economy recovered more quickly than most of the more developed world. By 1934 grain exports had resumed, and economic recovery was in full swing. Meanwhile, the Depression had provoked a deepening of the process of import substitution industrialization under way since the 1890s. Led by growth in textiles, the manufacturing sector boomed. As David Rock notes, "In 1935, the value of industrial production was still 40 percent below that of the agrarian sector; in 1943 industry surpassed agriculture for the first time."¹⁸ Beginning in the late 1930s, this industrial growth produced a significant flow of migrants from country to city. Between 1937 and 1947, 750,000 migrants, mostly from the neighboring provinces of Buenos Aires, Santa Fe, Entre Ríos, Corrientes, and Córdoba, arrived in Greater Buenos Aires, where they now represented a significant proportion of the growing industrial workforce.¹⁹

The 1920s and 1930s, then, were decades of economic convulsion, as prosperity gave way to crisis and then recovery and transformation. Unsurprisingly, this economic history exerted a profound impact on the geography and social organization of Buenos Aires. The rapid growth rates of the 1920s produced significant levels of social mobility. Needless to say, the poor did not benefit equally from the boom; inflation produced a dramatic increase in the cost of living at the beginning of the decade, and unemployment remained a significant problem.²⁰ Still, real wages climbed steadily, if moderately, from 1923 to 1928.²¹ In Buenos Aires, this economic growth was accompanied by a dramatic transformation in the spatial distribution of the population, deepening the urbanization of outlying areas that had begun earlier in the century. With the construc-

tion of an extensive public transportation system—by 1910 the city already had over four hundred miles of electric streetcar track—and the availability of parcels of land that could be purchased in monthly installments, new barrios grew rapidly, especially in the northern and western zones of the city, and increasing numbers of porteños relocated from the congested city center. The barrios of Almagro, Caballito, Flores, Belgrano, Palermo, and Villa Crespo all emerged around 1910, and the process continued throughout the 1920s and 1930s. In 1914 the outlying census districts of Vélez Sarsfield, San Bernardo, and Belgrano were home to 300,000 people, or 20 percent of the city's population. By 1936 the population of these areas had mushroomed to 1,000,000, or 40 percent of the total.²²

As we have already seen, Buenos Aires had never been a city of ghettos. With the exception of Barrio Norte, the city's exclusive, upper-class district, and a handful of working-class neighborhoods such as the Italian portside community of La Boca, residential areas were not segregated by ethnicity or class. Nevertheless, housing conditions at the turn of the century tended to underscore class differences. As Argentina's economy took off, Buenos Aires was unprepared for the massive numbers of immigrants who poured into the city. As a result, workers endured precarious housing arrangements and severe overcrowding. In the absence of a large-scale transportation network, most people needed to live near their workplaces downtown. In 1887, 26.5 percent of the population lived in centrally located *conventillos*, formerly elite residences transformed into dilapidated tenements housing multiple working-class families.²³ Others lived in small apartments, hotels, and various types of improvised shacks in what was then the outskirts of the city. But conditions changed dramatically with the growth of the barrios. As early as 1919, the proportion of the population living in *conventillos* had dropped to 9 percent, replaced in large measure by single-family houses, which sprang up with impressive speed throughout the new barrios. By 1930 the three outlying districts contained more than 50 percent of the city's buildings, the majority of them single-family residences.²⁴

The journey from a downtown *conventillo* to a single-family, owner-occupied home in the barrios is something of an Argentine cliché, symbolizing the social mobility that characterized the period. To be sure, historians have qualified the image, pointing out that only the most privileged workers were able to afford the monthly payments, and even

they needed the extra income of family members. Many would-be homeowners were victimized by speculators selling unlivable lots. Rental housing, often of quite poor quality, remained common throughout the city in the 1920s and 1930s. Moreover, even those who did manage to purchase land and build their own homes often faced extremely difficult conditions, in the form of a lack of basic services and shoddy construction.²⁵ Nevertheless, the general picture of relatively high levels of social mobility in these years does seem supported by the evidence. With the transition to an open and competitive electoral system on the national level in 1912 and in the municipality of Buenos Aires in 1917, patronage jobs in the rapidly growing public sector became an important avenue for advancement into the white-collar workforce.²⁶ But the expansion of the state was hardly the only factor at work. As scholars of immigration have shown, Argentina's middling level of development created many opportunities for newcomers beyond manual labor, enabling them to achieve more occupational mobility than either more or less developed destinations. Even as industrialization spread and large factories became more common, proletarianization proceeded far more slowly in Buenos Aires than in cities like New York. Not only was there a greater proportion of skilled labor in the workforce, but also it was far more common in Buenos Aires for immigrants like Manuel Sequeiro to become their own bosses.²⁷

Like the shop owner in *Los tres berretines*, most immigrants dreamed of a better life for their children, and here also, evidence suggests a high degree of success. Crucial in this regard was Argentina's system of public education, which made white-collar work as well as the professions accessible to many children from humble families. Examining the records of the largest Spanish mutual-aid society, José Moya has demonstrated that while 43 percent of Spanish-born women worked as servants in 1920, only 13 percent of their Argentine-born daughters did. By 1930 the proportion of Spanish women servants had remained roughly constant, but the daughters were doing even better: only 9 percent were servants, while 30 percent had achieved "professional" status, mostly as teachers.²⁸ Studies of Italian immigrants and their descendants reveal similar patterns.²⁹ Overnight, rags-to-riches success remained a rarity, but the economic expansion of these years made significant upward mobility from one generation to the next a realistic goal. As the case of the Spanish servants and their daughters suggests, economic growth expanded women's participation in the workforce. And women were not only domestics and

teachers; they were also present in meatpacking plants and textile mills. As early as 1895, women represented 22 percent of the economically active population, and nearly one-third of those employed by the capital city's largest factories.³⁰ As the industrial sector grew over the next few decades, so too did the numbers of women working outside the home.

The barrios that grew with such speed in the 1920s and 1930s, products of economic growth and social mobility, were extremely heterogeneous. Professionals, merchants, and small business owners lived alongside public employees, white-collar workers, skilled artisans, and industrial laborers. At the turn of the century, large factories had been mainly confined to the city's southern districts, a tendency that was reinforced by a municipal regulation in 1914 that created specific industrial zones. As a result, many residents of the new northern and western barrios lived far from their workplaces, a tendency that likely encouraged patterns of social interaction that did not revolve around work. Nevertheless, this trend ought not to be overemphasized. Despite the zoning ordinance, the 1920s and 1930s saw significant industrial expansion in Buenos Aires's three outlying districts, which by the mid-1940s housed 38 percent of the city's industrial establishments. Both domestic manufacturing and construction work were widespread in the barrios. Still, Buenos Aires had hardly become a factory town; alongside industrial development, the city also experienced a major expansion in both the commercial sector and the government, both of which continued to be major sources of employment in the city.³¹

CLASS IDENTITIES IN FORMATION

The rapid growth of the barrios as well as the diversity of the population that lived there made for an extremely fluid process of identity formation. Barrio residents were the targets of multiple, competing appeals, which sought to constitute their identities in diverse ways. Among the most salient of these appeals were those that emanated from a host of new associations and institutions, including political party committees, soccer clubs, libraries, newspapers, and the omnipresent *sociedades de fomento*, or development societies. These latter organizations tended to dominate the burgeoning public sphere of the barrios, and if they originated as vehicles for making concrete demands on the state, they soon took on more explicitly ideological roles, actively disseminating a set

of values that included progress, education, culture, and morality. In 1926 *Labor*, the newspaper of the Corporación Mitre, the sociedad de fomento of Barrio Nazca, described the institutions' evolution this way: "The sociedades de fomento of the Federal Capital have left aside their primitive modalities as groups of enthusiastic residents who, acting in hostile climates, combined their efforts toward the simple goal of getting one or another street paved and drained. . . . Their action is [no longer] limited to the physical improvement of the zones in which they operate, but rather they also work on the diffusion of primary and secondary education, on the creation of libraries and popular culture centers where the mentality of the people is forged."³² As *Labor* proudly proclaimed, these new barrio associations aimed to shape the consciousness and identity of the heterogeneous residents of the barrios they represented. The sociedad de fomento was an ideological instrument wielded by an emerging elite that hoped to impose its own vision on the barrio. Central to this hegemonic project were the many popular libraries created either by the sociedades themselves or by outside institutions such as the municipal government or the Socialist Party, which by 1932 had organized fifty-six of them throughout Buenos Aires. The barrio library served, as local leaders in the barrio of Barracas put it, as an instrument for disseminating "culture" to the "popular classes."³³ This project was visible both in the collections of books housed by the libraries, which emphasized the classics of the Western literary canon, and in the principal activity that took place there: the *conferencia*, in which visiting speakers addressed heterogeneous audiences on such topics as public health, education, literature, or art. As several historians have argued, these well-attended events offered barrio residents the opportunity to acquire "culture." What mattered was not so much the particular knowledge one could gain from a public lecture, but rather the performance of a certain "desirable lifestyle" that emphasized respectability, formality, and education. The goal was self-improvement as a means to achieve upward mobility.³⁴

Many of these values were, in fact, visible in the origins of the barrios. As Adrián Gorelik has argued, the municipal government played an active role in shaping the new barrios, particularly those that emerged in the southern and southwestern parts of the city. Concerned about the potentially negative effects of industrial development, authorities embarked on the project of moralizing the working-class population of this part of

the city through urban reform, including especially the construction of parks and plazas. The Industrial Regulation of 1914, which lent juridical force to the de facto segregation of industry in the southern districts, also aimed to ensure the creation of the *suburbio obrero decente*, or decent working-class suburb. The model for this type of community, according to Gorelik, was Parque Patricios, a barrio created in 1902 when the municipal government dismantled the old slaughterhouse in the southern district of San Cristóbal and replaced it with a park. Similarly, when working-class housing developments were built nearby, each was oriented around a green plaza. The idea was that these green spaces could impose a certain moral order on the leisure time of workers and thereby help build a decent, respectable community. By the 1920s Parque Patricios's reputation as a model, working-class barrio was enshrined in works of literature, and the *suburbio obrero decente* had become, in Gorelik's words, a "cultural paradigm."³⁵ The sociedades de fomento and popular libraries run by barrio elites embodied the same moralizing impulse visible in official urban reform. These institutions were instruments for imposing a particular model of respectability and decency. Even as they promised to deliver progress for the community and upward mobility for the individual resident, they also represented an effort to discipline the barrio population.

The image of barrio society that local elites disseminated via their associations, their libraries, and their newspapers was strongly inclusive. Social division and conflict were virtually absent from the lectures held at the popular libraries, even those run by the Socialist Party. Instead of class struggle, this discourse suggested that cooperation across class lines, as embodied by the sociedades de fomento themselves, was the most effective means of achieving social reform.³⁶ Local newspapers defined the barrio in opposition to the city center: whereas life downtown was dominated by money and selfish individualism, healthy family life and communal cooperation in the barrios eliminated, in the words of one community newspaper, "hateful social differences." In this discourse, as Luciano de Privitellio has pointed out, the barrios were both modern and capable of ameliorating the worst consequences of modernization. In the barrios, progress was open to anyone who was willing to embrace the values of hard work, morality, and culture.³⁷ This spirit of inclusiveness was visible as well in another characteristic of the discourse: barrio asso-

ciations vehemently insisted on and celebrated their apolitical character. The identity they sought to impose on the barrio was supposed to unite residents across petty distinctions of class or political faction.

Yet egalitarian rhetoric could mask or even facilitate elitist practice. In addition to serving communal interests, barrio organizations also provided positions of leadership for more “distinguished” residents.³⁸ In particular, the *sociedades de fomento*, despite insisting on their apolitical character, played an important role in politics both by presenting specific barrio demands to the authorities, and by occasionally aligning explicitly with one or another political party in order to affect policy more generally. In the mid-1930s, for example, a large group of *sociedades de fomento* seeking to protest the high rates charged by CHADE, one of the city’s electric companies, lent their support to the Socialist Party. In response to this threat, the conservative *intendente*, Mariano De Vedia y Mitre, was able to put together a competing coalition of barrio organizations.³⁹ For barrio leaders to attain this sort of political relevance and power, they needed to appear both as advocates of modernization and progress and as the legitimate representatives of their communities. Their commitment to an inclusive, egalitarian vision of progress was, thus, a key component of their hegemonic practice. Barrio leaders, who were most often doctors, merchants, or public employees, were involved simultaneously in the construction of an egalitarian, inclusive image of the barrio and in the pursuit of an elite status that would allow them to speak for the community. In fact, residents were encouraged to participate in community organizations as a means of achieving distinction: even if entry into the Argentine political or economic elite remained far out of reach, a white-collar worker or small shop owner could realistically aspire to becoming a *vecino notable* in his barrio.⁴⁰ At times, the tension between inclusiveness and elitism could produce conflict, as, for example, when barrio elites criticized the preference of many residents for soccer over other, more “serious” cultural pursuits.⁴¹ Clearly, the efforts of barrio elites to dress their institutions in egalitarian clothing did not convince everyone. The left-leaning tango poet Dante Linyera offered a more cynical, class-conscious interpretation: “In every barrio there is a *sociedad de fomento* for the rich and a police station for the poor.”⁴²

The competing tendencies toward egalitarianism and distinction were visible beyond the public sphere of the barrios; they were apparent as well in the changing consumption practices of porteños. As Fernando Rocchi

has argued, rapid economic growth, urbanization, and rising industrial production in turn-of-the-century Argentina laid the groundwork for the emergence of a “consumer society.”⁴³ As market culture spread, demand for domestically mass-produced goods like cigarettes, beer, and ready-to-wear clothes skyrocketed, and advertising gained new significance. Beginning in the early twentieth century, Argentine newspapers and magazines were filled with colorful announcements seeking to attract potential consumers and encourage brand loyalty. The target audience for much of this advertising, and the bulk of the market for the new products of domestic industry, was composed of the same heterogeneous population moving into the new barrios: workers and white-collar employees seeking, in part, to emulate the tastes and fashions of their social superiors. As Argentine industrialists recognized, elites bought imported goods; demand for the products of domestic industry came entirely from workers in pursuit of upward mobility and “the social classes of middle pecuniary position.”⁴⁴ This new consumer society helped produce a blurring of class distinctions in public life. Industrialists happily noted the tendency of porteño workers to spend a lot of money on proper shirts, ties, and even gold watches, while well-to-do porteños bemoaned the presence of plebeian families in the formerly aristocratic Palermo Park. As Rocchi has shown, denunciations of the nouveaux riches were common in the literature of the 1920s and 1930s. In 1932, for example, the writer Enrique Loncán declared that Argentina was the land of the *guarango*, a crude, poorly educated, and pretentious striver who failed to appreciate true elegance.⁴⁵

While these critiques testified to the democratizing impact of the new consumerism, they also revealed a desire to resist the trend and to reassert class distinction. And the world of consumption still provided the means to achieve this distinction, as the elite preference for foreign products reveals. If workers and others of modest means were increasingly able to emulate the rich through consumption, huge disparities in quality still separated the goods purchased by the poor from those available to the rich. In any case, even as advertisers appealed to the desire for upward mobility, the pitfalls of consumption as a means of attaining status were well known. The comic strip *Timoteo Puertonuevo* featured a poor bumbler intent on making it as an elegant radio star. In one strip from 1933, Timoteo sees an advertisement for a suit promising that “for just 50 pesos, you can become a Jhon [*sic*] Barrymore.” He rushes to the

shop and purchases the suit, reminding the tailor to leave off the epaulets that Socialists wear. He then impresses the object of his affection, a chorus girl, who declares him “elegant” and, using the English word, a true “gentleman.” But alas, when it begins to rain and his date asks for his jacket, Timoteo hesitates. When she declares that a real gentleman (this time, she uses the Spanish *caballero*) would gladly give her the shirt off his back, he pulls off the suit jacket revealing that he has no shirt.⁴⁶ Like all such attempts, Timoteo’s effort to purchase respectability and higher class status is doomed to fail. The strip criticizes social striving but from a different perspective than Loncán’s attack on the guarango. Here, it is not Timoteo’s poor taste we are laughing at; it is his gullibility. The comic strip depicts the widespread desire for upward mobility and the tendency of advertisers to appeal to it, even as it reveals a common-sensical skepticism toward the utopian promises of advertising. The social leveling that characterized the new consumer society had clear limits.

Both barrio elites and advertisers tended to encourage the pursuit of upward mobility and the erasure of class differences. Whether by acquiring culture and respectability at the local library or by purchasing a proper suit, porteños could aspire to overcome the increasingly invisible barriers that separated them from their socioeconomic superiors. The tendency to play down class differences was visible as well in the sphere of electoral politics. After electoral reforms in 1912 and 1917, the expansion of the electorate and the implementation of the secret ballot created a competitive environment in which political parties could no longer rely exclusively on fraud and patronage, and campaign rhetoric took on a new importance.⁴⁷ Throughout these years—and it is worth noting that universal male suffrage and competitive elections continued to function on the municipal level even after the military coup of 1930—the parties tended to avoid appeals to particular social classes and to emphasize instead their capacity to represent *el pueblo*. The Unión Cívica Radical, which dominated national elections in the years before 1930, was particularly insistent on this point. In the words of the Radical leader Hipólito Yrigoyen, elected president in 1916 and again in 1928, “we are the nation itself.”⁴⁸ In general, though, the aversion to class politics characterized most politicians regardless of party. Even the Socialists, who were the Radicals’ principal challengers in the capital city, were as likely to appeal to consumers, merchants, employees, or residents of suburban barrios, as they were to address themselves directly to workers. Despite their com-

mitment to Marxist orthodoxy, the Socialists' rhetoric shared many features with that of the Radicals. Both claimed to be the only party capable of representing the interests of the pueblo, and both tried to identify themselves with progress, modernization, and upward mobility. Direct appeals to working-class interests were not entirely absent from the political arena in this period: the Socialists did promise to pursue social reforms aimed at workers; some Radical factions outside of Buenos Aires were explicit in their promises to help the laboring classes; and even Yrigoyen himself engaged in *obrerismo*, expressing a vague commitment to attend to workers' needs. Still, political competition was for the most part conducted within the parameters of a non-pluralist vision of democracy, in which appeals to the people or to the nation as a whole enjoyed more legitimacy than class-based interpellations.⁴⁹

The inauguration of a competitive political system contributed to the emergence of a more inclusive and integrated society in 1920s and 1930s Buenos Aires. Although immigration rates remained high until the crisis of 1929, by the 1920s the Argentine-born children of immigrants made up a substantial proportion of the city's population. Unlike their parents, these porteños enjoyed full citizenship and effective suffrage. As we have seen, they also lived in a society in which economic opportunities existed and upward mobility, including the possibility of homeownership and a good education for their children, was a real possibility. They often lived far from their places of employment, in heterogeneous barrios where they were encouraged to participate in a rich network of local clubs, associations, and libraries. And they lived in a consumer society in which an increasing number of domestically manufactured goods were available at affordable prices, and in which advertisers frequently appealed to their desire for status. For Luis Alberto Romero and other historians, these developments produced a new set of values, as the working-class identity of earlier decades gave way to a "spontaneous ideology of social mobility." According to this view, the barrios in this period were filled not with members of the working class but with a diverse population better understood as the "popular sectors." For Romero and others, the widespread pursuit of self-improvement, higher status, and a better life was essentially middle-class. In other words, even though many individuals failed to realize the dream of middle-class respectability for themselves or their children, the aspiration was nearly universal; this was a "mass society of middle classes."⁵⁰

This description certainly does capture certain aspects of the period. It is undeniable that Buenos Aires had a large and growing number of small business owners, white-collar and public employees, teachers, and other middling groups. Many porteños, in other words, were neither poor nor rich. According to one recent estimate based on annual income statistics for 1914, the lower classes made up 55 percent of the population, while the rich constituted a tiny elite of less than half of 1 percent. In between these two extremes was a huge group—nearly 45 percent of Argentines—who might be called middle class.⁵¹ Though imprecise, these numbers are suggestive. They help demonstrate that the economic growth of these years did provide important economic opportunities for ordinary people. In this sense, they seem to substantiate both the image of this period as one characterized by high rates of social mobility and the widespread view of Argentina as the country with the largest middle class in Latin America. Moreover, in certain arenas, “middle-class” affiliations were increasingly visible in the 1920s and 1930s. The leaders of barrio associations, for example, did occasionally embrace their “middleness.” Barrio elites in Boedo stressed the importance of modesty, criticizing those who disdained the local shops in favor of more expensive and pretentious stores downtown.⁵² In celebrating their own upward mobility even as they distinguished themselves from the rich, they were beginning to craft a middle-class identity.

Nevertheless, as Ezequiel Adamovsky demonstrates in his recent history of the subject, middle-class identity was not widespread in Argentina during the 1920s and 1930s. Although some politicians and intellectuals hoped that something called the “middle class” might serve as a counterbalance to a radicalized proletariat, no political party or trade union presented itself as the defender of that sector. On the contrary, the organizations that represented retail clerks, public employees, and telephone workers adopted an explicitly working-class identity, while even the teachers’ and bank workers’ unions typically expressed solidarity with the labor movement. Unlike their counterparts in some Latin American countries, these white-collar workers did not embrace an explicit middle-class identity. In other words, the 45 percent of Argentines with middling income levels do not seem to have perceived themselves as members of a distinct class with a particular set of interests that distinguished them from those above and below them on the social spectrum.⁵³

This is not to deny that many values often associated with the middle

class were indeed on the rise, including not only self-improvement as a path to upward mobility, but also modesty, thriftiness, respectability, and patriarchy. An idealized image of the respectable family, with a hardworking father who provides for the education of his children and a non-working mother who nurtures their moral development, became prominent in this period.⁵⁴ Advertisers reinforced this gendered message by focusing their efforts on housewives who, they believed, controlled the family budget. By sponsoring daytime radio programs designed to appeal to stay-at-home mothers, manufacturers of food and medicines helped to construct a powerful image of respectable domesticity.⁵⁵ Yet these allegedly middle-class values were not incompatible with working-class identity, as the notion of a “decent working-class suburb” suggests. Moreover, these values did not cohere into a unified ideology or identity. On the contrary, tensions and ambivalence persisted. For example, barrio elites and politicians emphasized their commitment to modernization, but they also worried that the increasing presence of women in the modern workplace threatened the traditional respectability of the family.⁵⁶ *Los tres berretines* features an almost stereotypical, middle-class family ruled by a patriarch who seeks to inculcate an ethos of hard work in his sons while hoping for a good marriage partner for his daughter. But modern mass culture undermines Manuel Sequeiro’s patriarchal control over his wife and children as well as his idea of respectability. In the end, education and self-improvement are not so much the means to achieve upward mobility as quaint relics of a bygone era. Of course, the promise of transgressive mass culture is clearly limited by gender: unlike Manuel’s sons, his daughter remains confined by notions of respectability and agrees to stop attending the cinema. Yet for young men, *Los tres berretines* offers a choice between old-fashioned respectability and affiliation with the cultural practices of the poor; a modern, middle-class identity is not even an option.

Further complicating the idea that middle-class identity was on the rise is the fact that working-class militancy persisted and even expanded throughout the period. Extensive labor mobilization in Argentina dates to the first decade of the twentieth century. This first wave of labor struggle was led principally by anarchists, whose message seemed perfectly tailored to a society in which rampant fraud made the constitutional guarantee of universal male suffrage an empty promise.⁵⁷ With little reason to pursue Argentine citizenship, immigrant workers were

often receptive to anarchism's anti-political message. Nevertheless, even during the heyday of anarchist militancy in the first decade of the twentieth century, the growth of the labor movement owed a great deal to the ability of the unions to press workers' wage demands.⁵⁸ The pragmatism of the labor movement became even more evident after 1915 with the ascendancy of syndicalist organizers, who were more willing than the anarchists to seek the mediation of the state. The bread-and-butter orientation of Argentine unions reflected the consciousness of the immigrant rank and file. These immigrants combined working-class identity with a deep desire to achieve the upward mobility that had motivated their transatlantic journeys.⁵⁹

This combination produced an aggressive militancy that culminated in a massive strike wave during the 1916–21 period. Although the Bolshevik Revolution certainly inspired a new radicalism among many in the labor movement, working-class pragmatism persisted. Led by syndicalists, the unions openly sought the support of the Radical government of Hipólito Yrigoyen, a strategy that initially met with success as the administration backed workers' demands in order to keep exports flowing and to curry favor with working-class voters.⁶⁰ But labor mobilization eventually provoked repression: the government encouraged strikebreakers to crush the ongoing port conflict, allowed right-wing nationalists to attack unions and leftists, and unleashed the army on strikers during the infamous "Tragic Week" of January 1919. In the wake of this repression and facing a new surge in immigration, the labor movement entered a protracted period of decline. In 1920 the syndicalist labor federation had mobilized more than 100,000 workers in more than 598 unions, but just two years later, a newly formed federation could claim only 22,000 members in 161 unions.⁶¹ Strikes continued throughout the 1920s, but with the exception of a massive strike wave in and around the city of Rosario in 1928, they never came close in scope or intensity to the conflicts of 1916–21.⁶² This decline had many causes. While repression hampered the efforts of union organizers, ideological divisions weakened the labor movement from within. In all likelihood, the dynamism of the economy in these years also played a role. With wages rising, homeownership expanding in multiclass barrios, and the explosion of advertising exalting the promises of consumerism, it is not surprising that the labor movement lost ground and that many porteños chose the pursuit of upward mobility over the defense of class interests.

But the weakening of the labor movement was a temporary phenomenon. Although the military coup of 1930 unleashed a new wave of repression and the high unemployment of the next few years served to dampen labor militancy, the unions began to recover by the middle of the decade. After only 60 strikes in Argentina in 1934, there were 180 in 1935, 215 the next year, and an annual average of 118 for the rest of the decade.⁶³ This new aggressiveness accompanied rapid growth in union membership and a shift in the characteristics and strategy of the labor movement. Before 1930 the movement had been composed primarily of skilled workers organized in small craft unions; only the railroad and port workers had begun to create national organizations. But now, with the Socialists, syndicalists, and anarchists weakened and with industrialization producing a rapid increase in the ranks of the proletariat, the Communists—relative newcomers to the Argentine labor movement—were able to achieve significant growth in industrial unions. Between 1936 and 1941, the number of union members in the industrial sector doubled under the leadership of Communist unions. With thousands of unskilled and semi-skilled workers in their ranks, these organizations could not rely on their strategic position in the production process, as the old craft unions and railroad and port unions had done. Instead, the Communists built national organizations with highly centralized bureaucracies and forged political alliances to benefit their members.⁶⁴

The resurgence of the labor movement in the 1930s demonstrates that working-class affiliations and loyalties remained widespread in this period. If the growth of multiclass barrios and the advent of a consumer society served to blur class distinctions, industrialization and the efforts of Communist organizers pushed in the opposite direction. Moreover, working-class solidarity was not confined to discrete industrial zones; by the second half of the 1930s, it was widespread even in the new barrios. The three outlying census districts that were home to 40 percent of the porteño population in 1936 also housed some 22 percent of the city's industrial workers. Even if they lived in multiclass barrios, these workers had not simply exchanged their class consciousness for the pursuit of upward mobility. At key moments, many residents of these neighborhoods proved willing to express their solidarity with striking workers. In late 1935, sixty thousand construction workers walked off the job demanding wage increases, improved workplace safety, the reduction of hours, and the recognition of their union. As the conflict dragged on into

January, the principal labor unions launched a general strike. The result was a massive two-day protest, the largest and most violent since the Tragic Week of 1919. The epicenter of this conflict and the site of virtually all of the clashes between strikers and police was the zone of most recent urbanization, the booming neighborhoods of northern and western Buenos Aires.⁶⁵ Furthermore, class solidarity was not limited to industrial workers. During the 1930s, many white-collar workers embraced the labor movement.⁶⁶ Particularly influential were unionized retail clerks, who used their connections to the Socialist Party to secure the passage of protective legislation. By the end of the decade, some 15 percent of the city's clerks were organized, and the commercial employees' union threw its support to the Communists.⁶⁷ Both the intensity of the general strike in January 1936 and the strength of the retail clerks' union suggest that the expansion of working-class affiliations had a significant impact beyond factory walls.

Despite this upsurge in labor militancy, union members remained a minority among the working population in Buenos Aires. Nevertheless, working-class solidarity had an appeal and an influence beyond the unions. It was visible, for example, in the mainstream press and particularly in *Crítica*, the city's most popular evening newspaper. During the 1920s, *Crítica's* owner, the Uruguayan businessman Natalio Botana, embraced the sensationalist techniques of Hearst and Pulitzer, including attention-grabbing headlines, extensive crime reporting, and detailed coverage of the city's nightlife. By October 1924, *Crítica's* average circulation was 166,385, putting it in third place among Buenos Aires's many dailies; by the end of the decade, the paper was selling more than 300,000 copies per day.⁶⁸ Sylvia Saïtta argues that the newspaper built its audience through two complementary strategies. On the one hand, the paper pursued "expansion through specialization," continually generating new sections in order to appeal to distinct groups of potential readers.⁶⁹ On the other hand, *Crítica* adopted a consistent editorial pose as "the voice of the people."⁷⁰ The paper often employed this language in an inclusive manner, using its circulation figures as evidence of its status as the true representative of popular interests. But *Crítica's* populism also pushed it into an explicit alliance with the working class and the poor. In 1923 *Crítica* led a high-profile campaign in support of Kurt Wilckens, an anarchist who had assassinated an army colonel in retribution for the latter's role in the brutal repression of striking workers in Patagonia. Through-

out the remainder of the decade, *Crítica* supported Argentina's labor unions, organized charity drives on behalf of the needy, and repeatedly presented itself as a defender of the poor.⁷¹ Although Botana's paper would never be confused with an orthodox, leftist publication, the defense of workers' interests was central to its appeal. That this strategy proved so successful reveals the continuing relevance of working-class identity for many porteños.

In the 1920s and 1930s, the barrios of Buenos Aires were not home to a self-conscious middle class. Instead, these areas experienced a fluid, ambiguous process in which a diverse population was addressed in various competing and contradictory ways. Political parties, barrio associations, and advertisers tended to emphasize modernity, upward mobility, and respectability, while downplaying class differences, but working-class solidarities persisted. These were most obvious in the revival of the labor movement, but they were also visible in the populist stance of *Crítica*, in the conflicts between the leaders and rank-and-file members of ethnic associations, in the recurring conflict in barrio associations between the "culture" promoted by barrio elites and the sports embraced by more plebeian residents, as well as in the sporadic but noteworthy appearance of appeals to workers in electoral politics. The audiences for all these discourses overlapped significantly. A member of a Communist-led labor union, for example, might well live in a multiclass barrio, participate in the local *sociedad de fomento*, and vote for Radical Party politicians.

The ambiguity of class formation in this period is visible in the memoir of Edmundo Rivero, a major tango singer of the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s.⁷² Born in 1911, Rivero grew up in Saavedra, a recently urbanized barrio in the northwest corner of Buenos Aires. His father had been a railroad station chief and later worked as a police officer, while his mother was a housewife. The family lived in a large house with Edmundo's grandparents. Here, then, was a model of the home-owning, ostensibly middle-class family of the Buenos Aires barrios. As a child, Rivero made extensive use of Saavedra's municipal library, where he read the novels of Dumas and the poetry of Dante. Moreover, a certain expectation of respectability structured his youth. Rivero initially kept his musical pursuits a secret from his parents, since he feared they would not approve, and although he sang with his sister at home, she, as a young woman, was not allowed into the bars. Nevertheless, this was by no means a uniformly middle-class world. In addition to the library, Saavedra also had a bar frequented

by tough guys and petty criminals, where the young Rivero would listen to the musicians who came to perform. Rivero remembered the sadness that reigned in his neighborhood in the aftermath of the labor conflicts of January 1919. Moreover, he grew up speaking lunfardo and was enamored of *payadores*, or itinerant singers, like Juan Pedro López and Martín Castro, whose verses denounced poverty and social injustice. Rivero did not finish his secondary education and became a professional tango singer after completing his military service in 1929. His upbringing in the barrio had provided him with a desire for upward mobility but also with a strong affiliation with the popular culture of poor Argentines.

The entrepreneurs and artists who developed the music, radio programs, and films of the 1920s and 1930s sought to build an audience among the residents of these Buenos Aires barrios. The mass culture they created bore the traces of this ideological milieu: it combined a progressive commitment to upward mobility with populist, even class-conscious discourses. Ostensibly middle-class values, like respectability, hard work, and the pursuit of upward mobility, found expression in the new media, but so did nostalgic critiques of modernity, populist denunciations of the rich, and celebrations of the virtues and national authenticity of the working poor. Nevertheless, mass culture did not simply hold up a mirror to its consumers. In fact, the mass culture of this period refashioned local cultural elements into an image of Argentine society that differed sharply from the heterogeneous and ambiguous world of the porteño barrios. The positive depiction of plebeian culture in *Los tres berretines* was typical of local mass culture, but the film's focus on a respectable middle-class family was less so.⁷³ Most domestic movies, songs, and radio programs in this period depicted Argentina as a society hopelessly divided between the poor and the rich. To understand why, we need to recognize that Argentina was not a hermetically sealed cultural world. Argentine producers faced intense competition from a flood of imported mass culture. As I will argue, this transnational marketplace encouraged a reliance on melodrama and an emphasis on populism, expanding the distance between Argentine reality and its mass cultural representation.