

# THE MIDDLE CLASS: POLITICAL, ECONOMIC, AND SOCIAL PERSPECTIVES

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**The Argentine Silent Majority: Middle Classes, Politics, Violence, and Memory in the Seventies.** By Sebastián Carassai. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014. Pp. xii + 357. \$25.95 paper. ISBN: 9780822356011.

**Latin America's Emerging Middle Classes: Economic Perspectives.** Edited by Jeffrey Dayton-Johnson. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015. Pp. xxv + 209. \$100.00 cloth. ISBN: 9781137320780.

**Latin America's Middle Class: Unsettled Debates and New Histories.** Edited by David S. Parker and Louise E. Walker. Plymouth, UK: Lexington Books, 2013. Pp. viii + 236. \$34.99 paper. ISBN: 9780739168530.

**Creating a Common Table in Twentieth-Century Argentina: Doña Petrona, Women, and Food.** By Rebekah E. Pite. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2013. Pp. xv + 326. ISBN: 9781469606903.

**Waking from the Dream: Mexico's Middle Classes after 1968.** By Louise E. Walker. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013. Pp. xviii + 321. \$65.00 cloth. ISBN: 9780804781510.

Three myths haunt the scholarly literature on the middle class in Latin America: (1) the middle class is impossible to define; (2) the middle class is "anxious" because it is endangered, fragile, and maybe even disappearing; and (3) the middle class is the progressive hope for (or the reactionary impediment to) political and economic change. Of course, there is some truth in each of them, as there is in most myths. But they can be misleading and therefore deserve scrutiny.

## MYTH ONE: THE UNDEFINABLE MIDDLE CLASS

This is an old issue. Marx puzzled over bourgeois society's growing "horde of funkies, the soldiers, sailors, police, lower officials . . . mistresses, grooms, clowns . . . lawyers, physicians, scholars, schoolmasters and inventors, etc." Vague references to the middle classes, middle bourgeoisie, intermediate strata, and similar concepts abound in his writings.<sup>1</sup> A century and a half later, there is no standard definition or even consensus over what to call the mixed bag of people in the middle of the class structure. Among scholars, there are disciplinary differences

1. Karl Marx, *Theories of Surplus Value* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1963), vol. 1, p. 573. See, for other examples, the *Communist Manifesto* and the *Eighteenth Brumaire*, available in many editions.

in the ways the middle class is conceived and counted. Economists have relied on income ranges; sociologists have traditionally focused on occupational categories; and historians, inspired by the “cultural turn” in the historiography of recent years, have understood middle class in terms of the way groups of people imagine and speak of themselves. Many scholars, including Louise E. Walker and Sebastián Carassai, authors of two of the titles reviewed here, have abandoned the singular “middle class” for the plural “middle classes” to emphasize the heterogeneity they see in this category. The implication is that the middle class is somehow more heterogeneous than any other class. But perhaps it only appears so because we who write about class are typically middle class and, like most people, inclined to perceive finer social distinctions in closer proximity to ourselves.

At the beginning of her book on the Mexican middle class after 1968, Walker defines her subject with list of occupations including lawyers, doctors, teachers, white-collar workers at various levels, technical workers, and small business owners—in short, the people we might think of when we visualize the middle class. In an appendix, Walker thoughtfully compares various twentieth-century definitions and population estimates of Mexico’s middle class, all based on some combination of occupation and income. She is correct in her conclusion that “even the most rigorous quantitative . . . estimates are partly subjective” (211). Walker’s conception of her own subject matter is expansive, stretching well beyond groups of people defined by jobs and pay. Middle class, she writes, refers to “a set of material conditions, a state of mind, and a political discourse” (2). Reflecting these different concerns and the shifting character of her sources, Walker’s sense of the middle class changes from chapter to chapter.

Carassai, writing on Argentina in the 1970s, draws on Pierre Bourdieu to define middle class as “a theoretical construction based on the objective existence of differences and differentiations that in turn are expressed in different dispositions or habitus. In other words, people can be aggregated together in ‘classes’ or ‘groups’ because, in order to exist socially, they distinguish themselves from others” (7). Whatever the value of this conception of class, Carassai’s invocation of Bourdieu brings us no closer to understanding who he is studying and has no obvious connection to his research. The book is largely based on intensive interviewing of a small number of respondents. But Carassai is reticent about how they were chosen or why he takes them to be middle class. An appendix on case selection simply explains his rationale for choosing the two cities and one small town that were his research sites. He typically characterizes individual respondents by age and gender, sometimes mentions education in passing, but hardly ever reveals a respondent’s occupation. There are hints in the text that Carassai relied on two sampling methods common in studies of this sort: recruiting respondents in what are locally known as middle-class neighborhoods and “snowballing,” that is, depending on some respondents to lead the researcher to others.

Writing on the Brazilian middle class in the 1930s and 1940s for the volume edited by David S. Parker and Louise Walker, Brian P. Owensby rejects the notion of “an a priori definition.” Middle class must be understood in a way that is historically specific. He delineates his subject as the families of white-collar employees

and professionals in Brazil's two major cities who did not do manual labor, were usually white or light skinned, and were relatively well educated. But Owensby insists that "this sketch is less than half the story," since he is concerned with the experience of people in a changing society. "[Class] is as much state of mind as objective condition, as much a matter of becoming as a specific social station" (Parker and Walker, 131–132). Concerned with the dynamics of change, Owensby is suspicious of definitions, which he takes to be inherently "static."

In contrast to Owensby, Carassai, and Walker, the economists who contributed to Jeffrey Dayton-Johnson's edited volume adopt definitions of middle class that are inevitably precise but less nuanced than they easily could be. These definitions are based almost exclusively on per capita household income as measured in national surveys. These researchers pass up the opportunity provided by the same data to define middle-class households more convincingly by incorporating information on occupation or education, along with income. They might also have made a more reasonable allowance for household size than per capita income, which is based on the questionable assumption that a four-person household needs twice as much income as a two-person household to maintain a middle-class standard of living. They define a middle-class income in either relative or absolute terms—for example, between 50 and 150 percent of the median per capita income or between \$10 and \$50 daily per capita. The first identifies middle-class households by their standing in comparison with other households in the society; the second, by their capacity to maintain what is conceived to be a middle-class standard of living. The contributors have devised multiple variants on these two basic approaches.

In sum, defining middle class, far from impossible, seems all too easy. There is not and there cannot be, given our diverse concerns, methods, and sources, a "correct" definition of middle class. Inevitably, definitions have proliferated. But there are better and worse ones. The best are truly definitions and so do not blur the line between definition and theory. They relate in obvious ways to the sources or sampling methods employed. Most of all, they are clear, concrete, and evocative, allowing us to imagine the people we are reading about.

#### MYTH TWO: THE ENDANGERED, ANXIOUS MIDDLE CLASS

With remarkable regularity the scholarly literature describes the Latin American middle class as endangered, vulnerable, insecure, and most especially, anxious. The terms "decline" or "extinction," Parker notes, appear frequently with "middle class" in book titles (Parker and Walker, 18n2). According to Owensby, the lives of middle-class Brazilians in the 1930s and 1940s were marked by "insecurities," "uncertainties," and "anxiety." Hoping to move up, they suffered fear of falling down. He attributes this state of mind to "the ways a modern market mentality converged with traditional notions of social hierarchy" (Parker and Walker 131, 134). Walker describes Mexico's rebellious middle-class youth of the 1970s as struggling with their own class identity and torn by "self-doubt, anxiety and contradictory paths" (41). She finds, in the unhinged political gossip and mordant

humor of a group of professional men gathered for morning coffee at upscale Sanborns, “a channel for middle-class anxieties amidst a worsening economic situation” (53). Their conversations were monitored by government agents—clear evidence of the regime’s own anxieties. A newspaper series of the era, she notes, portrayed a Mexican middle class given to alcoholism and thoughts of suicide.

A. Ricardo López’s piece on Colombian office culture, in the Parker and Walker volume, analyzes the minutes of employee meetings held in the 1930s and 1940s to air workplace issues. He finds evidence of the “anxieties and contradictions” experienced by white-collar workers that came with the expansion, rationalization, and, especially, the growing feminization of office work. Parker’s own contribution to the volume records the birth, in the midst of a 1919 strike by white-collar workers, of what he calls “one of the classic myths of the Peruvian middle class.” It was claimed “that they suffered *more* from inflation than did manual workers because their inherent social status left them no choice but to maintain a level of consumption that they could no longer afford” (Parker and Walker, 114). J. Pablo Silva, writing on Chile in this period, encounters the same argument, promoted, as in Peru, by advocates for office workers (Parker and Walker, 176).

Writing of contemporary Latin America for the Dayton-Johnson volume, C. Daude, J. R. de Laiglesia, and Á. Melguizo conclude that most middle-class people in the region are “vulnerable” because two-thirds lack formal sector protections such as unemployment, health, maternity, or retirement benefits. This finding is, however, questionable because their definition of middle class is skewed toward the low end of the income distribution; their measure for formality excludes many who, as they concede, may receive benefits; and they do not appear to allow for people who cannot claim benefits at work but may be protected because they belong to households that include formal sector workers, a common phenomenon.

One might conclude from this literature, taken together, that middle-class people in Latin America have a narrow emotional range and are, relative to other classes, uniquely vulnerable and anxious. Scholarly focus on periods of upheaval and crisis in the region has contributed to this general impression.<sup>2</sup> Ironically, the available evidence indicates that the middle class grew steadily in both numbers and affluence in the course of the twentieth century, perhaps even during the so-called lost decade of the eighties, and has continued to do so in the twenty-first century. Walker’s appendix summarizing the relevant Mexican studies for 1895 to 2000 supports this conclusion (213–215). Although these estimates of the size of the middle class vary widely, depending on the measures employed, the one consistency across studies is growth.<sup>3</sup>

2. My own work falls into this category, notably *Mexico’s Middle Class in the Neoliberal Era* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2007).

3. Walker gives a clear explanation of the differences. However, her table A.1 mixes up the figures for 1992 to 1996 from my main middle-class series. See Gilbert, *Mexico’s Middle Class*, 95. For some other Latin American countries in the twentieth century see the “higher non-manual” series in Orlandina de Oliveira and Bryan Roberts, “Urban Social Structures in Latin America, 1930–1990,” in *Latin America: Economy and Society since 1930*, ed. Leslie Bethell (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 305–312.

## MYTH THREE: THE PROGRESSIVE (REGRESSIVE?) MIDDLE CLASS

Arguments about the political role of the middle class are almost as old as those over its proper definition. They stretch back to early twentieth-century debates among European political theorists, who variously saw the “new” (salaried) middle class as a stabilizing force or a potential ally of a revolutionary proletariat.<sup>4</sup> Among students of Latin America, the work of John J. Johnson set off a discussion of middle-class politics in the late 1950s. The Parker and Walker volume includes contributions by Johnson and others critical of his views. Johnson takes an optimistic view of the expanding “middle groups,” whom he would refer to as “the middle sectors” in his subsequent book on the topic.<sup>5</sup> He sees them as a modernizing, democratizing force, supportive of social reform, industrialization, and economic nationalism. Johnson was convinced that they were challenging the power of traditional elites and broadening the social base of politics. In contrast, Fredrick B. Pike’s contribution on the Chilean class system describes a middle class closely identified with the elite, contemptuous of the popular classes, and reactionary in its politics. His piece is not quite a refutation of Johnson, however, since it is focused on one country in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, while Johnson’s argument is continent-wide and generalizes from the recent past to the future. Charles Wagley’s contribution divides the middle class into an upper middle class that sounds much like Pike’s conservative middle, and a largely salaried, lower middle class that is similar to Johnson’s modernizing middle. But Wagley’s lower middle is ambivalent in its politics—progressive until it feels threatened from below, when it doesn’t mind exchanging democracy for military rule. As Parker points out, it was middle-class support of right-wing military coups, beginning with Brazil’s in 1964, that undermined faith in a middle sector political project based on Johnson (Parker and Walker, 9).

Walker and Carassai are less interested in the political potential of the middle class than in understanding the meaning of middle class in the political imaginations of Mexicans and Argentines. For Walker, the term *middle class* “is an element of political discourse that generates powerful fantasies and fears” (102). In Mexico of the late 1970s, the middle-class fantasy of the ruling Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) was that the oil boom would enable it to win back the critical support of the middle class by, for example, expanding middle-class consumption. More often in these years the Mexican middle class was the object of political “fears,” which Walker finds expressed in popular culture. Televisa, a network with strong ties to the regime, aired a historical series that portrays the middle class as the ally of the wealthy, opposed to progressive change since Porfirian times, and enjoying benefits of the revolution that were supposed to have gone to workers and peasants. In the popular crime noir novels of the period by Paco Ignacio Taibo II, middle-class characters are disillusioned and passive in the face of official corruption. According to Carassai, Argentine intellectuals,

4. See Arthur J. Vidich, ed., *The New Middle Classes: Life-Styles, Status Claims, and Political Orientations* (New York: New York University Press, 1995).

5. John J. Johnson, *Political Change in Latin America: The Emergence of the Middle Sectors* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1958).

artists, journalists, and young political activists in the early 1970s were similarly critical of their own country's middle class, which they described as materialistic, fearful of change, devoid of ideology, and passively adaptive to any kind of political regime. Ironically, underlying these judgments was the persistent notion that the middle class was meant to be the "responsible" sector of society, disinterested and right-thinking in a way that was not expected of the elite, the military, or the working class.

The myth of a progressive middle class is rooted in the inevitably futile search for a new "universal class" to take on the transformative duties that Marx reserved for the bourgeoisie and the proletariat at successive periods of history. But classes are not conscious political actors with coherent, stable political projects. They are collections of individuals, more or less connected to one another and somewhat homogeneous in their interests, whose political behavior varies with time, place, and circumstances. The emergence of sizable middle classes in twentieth-century Latin America radically altered the social terrain on which the region's political history would unfold. For better or worse, it did not determine the directions that history would take.

#### TWO EDITED VOLUMES

The volume edited by Parker and Walker is a handy way into the historical literature. The introduction by Parker neatly outlines the issues. The editors provide helpful introductions to each reading and a useful bibliography. Part I is devoted to the classic literature of the 1950s and 1960s, most of it relevant to Johnson's argument. It also includes Mario Benedetti's often reprinted short story "The Budget" ("El Presupuesto"), a wonderful satire on the petty struggles of a group of office workers trapped in a backwater of the bureaucracy. Part 2, titled "New Histories," reflects the cultural turn of the current generation of historians. Included here are the pieces by Parker, Owensby, López, and Silva referred to earlier. Parker and Silva convincingly demonstrate the power of the way groups are imagined and labeled. Parker's early twentieth-century white-collar *empleados* adopted trade union organization and tactics but insisted on the social and economic distinction between themselves and blue-collar *obreros*. *Empleado* became a synonym for middle class and a privileged legal category. Silva describes a similar early history for Chile's organized white-collar workers, who initially were seen as the quintessential middle-class group and were regarded by politicians and intellectuals as militant and potentially radical. But in the 1950s and 1960s, the writings of influential leftist scholars reimagined the middle class as a reactionary petty bourgeoisie, tied to the traditional elite. The result was a discourse that implicitly excluded *empleados* from the circle of potential allies, with according to Silva unfortunate political consequences.

The contributors to Dayton-Johnson's volume are a mix of economists working in government, academia, and international organizations such as the World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank. Readers will be interested in their research findings regarding the growth of the middle class since 2000 and related questions. The editor's introduction includes a clear explanation of the

various income-based definitions. Most of the research draws on national household income surveys for the first ten or twelve years of this century. Here are the key takeaways. By any measure, Latin America's middle class has grown impressively during this period. At the same time, poverty rates and inequality levels have come down, though inequality remains high. Behind these developments are decent economic growth, more equal labor market rewards, and transfer programs like Brazil's Bolsa Família, which have boosted incomes at the bottom. By a conservative standard (the equivalent of roughly \$15,000 to \$75,000 annual income for a family of four), 34 percent of Latin Americans can be considered middle class (Dayton-Johnson, 102). This figure represents a retail market of some 175 million people with substantial discretionary income. One of the more intriguing pieces in this volume, by L. Casanova and H. B. B. Renck, examines the business response to this rapidly growing market. They particularly focus on the role of Latin American multinationals (the *multilatinas*), regional giants that are closer than their global competitors to their middle-class customers and more flexible in responding to them.

#### WALKER: HOW THEY LOST THE MIDDLE CLASS

Walker's central concerns in *Waking from the Dream* include the growing disaffection of the middle class as the Mexican economic "miracle" faltered in the 1970s and early 1980s, and the angst of the ruling party over the erosion of middle-class support. She argues for a new understanding of this period.

It is time to de-center the 1968 student movement in explanations of Mexican history. It is intellectually irresponsible to lionize the student movement; doing so magnifies its significance and distorts our understanding of Mexico's recent past. The crucial story is the historical arc of the middle classes, of which the students were only one part. . . . The future of the PRI's Institutional Revolution actually turned on how a broad spectrum of the middle classes would react. (12)

Walker has overstated her case here. If anything, the importance of 1968 grew over time as middle-class Mexicans and others who had been distant from Tlatelolco became aware of the massacre and connected it to larger problems of official impunity and undemocratic institutions. But she is right about the need to broaden our perspective on middle-class disaffection, and she has exploited an impressive array of sources to do so. In the 1970s and 1980s, as Walker convincingly demonstrates, the regime's middle-class support was leaking out of many holes, including rebellious youth, but also the angry men gathered over morning coffee at Sanborn's (53). Another hole was the protest movement that emerged from middle-class neighborhoods devastated by the 1985 Mexico City earthquake and victimized by the government's indifferent response to the disaster. Still another was the middle-class reaction to the left-leaning school texts issued by the government in the early 1970s.

The PRI and the middle-class together constituted what Walker terms "an elite realm" within which battles over the future of the country were fought out. The central struggle, over neoliberalism, divided both sectors and produced winners

and losers among middle-class workers. But after the twin disasters of the 1982 economic collapse and the Mexico City earthquake, the party's decades-long alliance with the middle class was, according to Walker, at an end. Having little to say about the years after 1985, Walker misses the final act in the drama. President Carlos Salinas (1988–1994) decisively committed the country to neoliberal economic policies and, for the moment, won back much of middle class by presiding over a period of notable prosperity for middle-class households. When the boom collapsed in the 1994–1995 economic crisis, middle-class anger knew no bounds, precisely because middle-class Mexicans, who had strongly believed in Salinas and his program, felt yet again betrayed by their rulers. In 2000, Walker writes, "the middle classes, and many others [voted] against the PRI" (196). This underestimates what happened. An analysis of exit poll data shows that the middle class, unlike the rest of the population, voted overwhelming for the opposition PAN. Without that middle-class vote, PRI could have won yet another election.<sup>6</sup>

#### CARASSAI: THE SILENCE OF THE MIDDLE CLASS

The subject of Carassai's book is the attitude of the "non-activist" majority of Argentina's middle class toward the violence and counterviolence of the 1970s and early 1980s. It is not always clear whether his concern is with how people experienced the period, how they remember it, or perhaps both. His method involves repeated interviews with a small number of people. He quotes from the interviews at length. Carassai apparently resisted the temptation to challenge respondents about the Dirty War with the kind of questions one might want to put to Germans who had lived through the Holocaust era. Instead he created a video documentary of the period, drawn from popular culture, advertising, news media, and magazines, showing comedy sets, scenes of protest and repression, news of bombings and kidnappings, and images of labor, political, military and guerilla leaders. All were presented in chronological order without off-screen commentary. Carassai would show a segment of the video and then ask what memories it evoked.

What Carassai learned about the silent middle-class majority in this fashion is not entirely surprising. They were consistently anti-*peronista*, having no more enthusiasm for the Peronism of the 1970s than for historic Peronism, though, ironically, they regarded Evita as a sympathetic figure. Many who were university students in the 1970s were initially supportive of the aims of the student movement and critical of state repression of student activists, but they came to see the activists as dogmatic, intolerant, and violent and to resent the movement's disruptions of their studies. Carassai's respondents neither supported the guerillas nor understood their objectives.

What these representatives of the silent middle-class majority most recalled was the violence of the era, especially after 1974, when state repression turned brutal, massive, and indiscriminate. They understood this phenomenon in terms

6. Dennis Gilbert, "Social Class and Voter Preference in Recent Mexican Elections." *Mexican Studies/Estudios Mexicanos* 28, no. 2 (2012): 327–350.



of what Carassai, following Michael Taussig, calls “state fetishism.” According to his respondents, “These people [the victims of state repression] must have been doing something, right?” “[The military] knew who they were.” “[They] had a very good system of intelligence.” “[They] didn’t bother me.” Respondents preferred to think of the violence as something unrelated to their own lives, something between the “lefties” and the military. But they contradicted themselves by recalling that one could easily get in trouble by wearing a beard, having long hair, reading the wrong things, or criticizing the military. People burned their books to protect themselves. “The fear was constant.” You could just be, as people said at the time, “sucked away” [*chupado*] for no good reason and without preliminaries (130, 161–168).

Carassai devotes a large part of his book to analyzing representations of violence in the mass media, satire, and advertising, focusing on the years before repressive violence became endemic. He includes an intriguing discussion of *Taxi Driver*, a popular TV soap opera of the era with a subplot revolving around conflict between a student who gets caught up in violent political activity and his older brother who is devoted to the family and indifferent to politics. In the late 1960s and 1970s, writes Carassai, “violence becomes part of the discourse of marketing” (208). He reproduces many images, which he describes as typical, suggesting that advertising of the era was saturated with guns and violence. At a time when “liquidation” referred to political murder, a store publicized a menswear sale with the slogan, “This is what it means to liquidate.” A well-dressed man holding a machine gun presides over an ad with the slogan, “We kill . . . prices.” A beverage ad promised “a gunshot for your thirst.” Many examples link seductive female images with guns. A lingerie ad proclaiming “Wanted! For killing in intimacy” shows a woman in a bra, holding a smoking handgun. In another, a woman in a miniskirt, aiming a pistol, stands by a motorcycle, under the words, “The only one [*la única*] with license to shoot” (205–206).

In these ads, according to Carassai, women were, as always, objects of desire, “under the gaze of others.” But now they “imposed the conditions under which desire was channeled” (244). In the broader discourse of violence, he finds an attraction to decisiveness, courage, and manliness and, especially, to swift, sweeping solutions to all problems. Carassai cautions against a causal interpretation of the relationship between such discourse and political behavior but concludes that “concrete manifestations of violence . . . unfolded over a background of an increasing violence subconsciously shared by broad sectors of the society, a sort of pre-ideological second nature” (235). Perhaps this tells us something about the roots of violent rebellion and brutal repression in Argentina. But Carassai does little to show how it connects to his central concern, the attitudes of the silent middle-class majority in an era when, as he writes, “death was not thought of as a problem but rather as a solution” (265).

#### PITE: RECIPES FOR MIDDLE-CLASS DOMESTICITY

Rebekah Pite’s book is a career biography of Argentine “culinary celebrity,” Petrona Carrizo de Gandulfo (1890s to 1992). Doña Petrona, as she was known,

was the author of Argentina's dominant cookbook through much of the twentieth century (*El libro de Doña Petrona*) and a Julia Child / Martha Stewart figure who "built a multimedia empire around her name" (7). She was cooking on television a decade before Julia Child got there. Doña Petrona helped to define middle-class domesticity for Argentine women.

Pite had access to Petrona Carrizo's papers, including an unpublished autobiography, and interviewed her granddaughter, who was her partner in later years and the coauthor of recent editions of the cookbook. To gauge her significance, Pite questioned dozens of women—many of whom owned the Doña Petrona's cookbook and had watched her cook on TV—about their memories and impressions of Doña Petrona.

In 1928, Doña Petrona was one of a small group of women hired by a British company to do cooking demonstrations as a way of promoting its gas stoves (a "modern" substitute for traditional coal) to middle-class housewives. The women were trained at the local branch of the renowned French culinary school, Le Cordon Bleu, which had been established in Buenos Aires in 1914 to prepare cooks for elite households and institutions. Petrona had shown little interest in cooking, would never work as a cook (a low-status position she shunned), and didn't cook at home, but she needed the job. She would come to think of herself as a teacher, instructing professional housewives in domestic arts. By 1933, Petrona was writing a magazine column and doing a commercially sponsored radio program, and in 1934 she published the first edition of her cookbook.

*El libro de Doña Petrona* adapted the cosmopolitan cuisine and cooking methods that Petrona had learned at Le Cordon Bleu for middle-class Argentine housewives. The book included a mix of French, Italian, and Spanish recipes, along with some traditional criollo dishes; there would be more of those in later editions. The ingredients were expensive. The recipes were precise, complicated, and time consuming. Petrona was writing for an audience of relatively prosperous middle-class women who were full-time *amas de casa* and might even employ a cook. In fact, her book included advice on how to manage domestics and instruction in the mechanics of gracious living, such as how to wash fine linen tablecloths, how to set a formal table, and how to decorate the house—topics that might be especially interesting to the upwardly mobile women with little previous exposure to such matters. She assumed that her readers would be dedicated entirely to home and family, an ironic ideal given her own celebrity career. But she retained patriarchal values, saying that she gave ultimate authority to her husband, placed her money in a joint account, and required his permission to spend it.

*El libro de Doña Petrona* went through over one hundred editions and sold millions of copies. It was especially popular in the 1950s and 1960s. But over time, Petrona's audience was changing. More middle-class women joined the paid labor force and fewer had full-time, if any, domestic help. In the 1970s, Doña Petrona, perhaps inevitably, became the special target of feminist criticism and satire. She adjusted, adding some recipes to her book with shorter preparation times, dropping the advice on care of fine linens—who had time for that?—and explaining how to organize household tasks with limited domestic help. In periods of economic downturn, she included some dishes with less expensive ingredients and

even published a book of economical recipes. Late in life, she recognized that working had become “normal” for women (217). But she retained her preference for fine cooking and traditional gender roles. She advised working women to learn to use their time at home more efficiently and employ domestic help. They shouldn’t expect men to pick up the slack. “One can’t,” she commented in 1966, “imagine a man cleaning, cooking and washing dishes” (181). Most Argentines probably still agreed with her.

Given her broad popularity, political leaders would have appreciated Petrona’s implicit or explicit endorsement. But she carefully steered around politics throughout her career, never, according to Pite, joining the celebrities who criticized Juan Perón in the 1950s, as he grew more authoritarian, and she was silent like most Argentines in the face of the horrors of the late 1970s and early 1980s.<sup>7</sup>

For Pite, Petrona’s career is a mirror in which we can see reflected shifting images of domesticity. In her earliest incarnation, Petrona taught aspiring middle-class women how to be modern, professional housewives. As the lives of middle-class women changed, she reluctantly adjusted her advice to the needs of another kind of modern, middle-class professional. Pite also credits Petrona with helping to create the national “common table” of her title, which she describes as the “common cuisine and set of domestic practices” that allow Argentines to think of themselves as members of an “imagined community.” This imagined community was more feminine and less dependent on patriots, presidents, and revolutions than the ones historians usually write about. It was a middle-class community for a country that liked to think of itself as middle class, while forgetting those who could not afford a seat at the table.

## CONCLUSION

It would be a stretch to draw general conclusions from this diverse stack of books. What they do demonstrate is the growing curiosity about Latin America’s middle classes in various academic disciplines, government agencies, and international organizations. This trend reflects the impressive growth of both regional and global middle classes in recent years. In academia, it is also related to a theoretical/ideological shift away from a polarized view of Latin American societies concerned especially with elite power and popular struggle, and toward an interest in the diverse experiences of the broad middle.

7. In a future printing, the publishers may want to correct a peculiar error regarding this period. General Juan Carlos Onganía was not murdered by the Montoneros in 1970 (184). He died in his bed in a military hospital in 1995.