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***Criollo* Entrepreneurialism: Transforming racial and class identities and social mobility  
among mixed-race Argentines**

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Doctor of Philosophy

Cultural Anthropology

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An abstract of a dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the James T. Laney School of Graduate Studies of Emory University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Anthropology 2020

## Abstract

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By

Sara Kauko

This dissertation examines how mixed-race people, i.e. *criollos*, aspire for and experience social mobility in Santiago del Estero, Argentina's north-western interior. Historically, social mobility among *criollos* has been made difficult by the sociocultural imaginaries that conceive of Argentina as a white, middle-class country. *Criollos* have traditionally inhabited the society's margins, where their role has been to represent Argentina's folklore, or simply, to be the country's 'inconvenient *other*.' While such race-class hierarchies persist in Argentina, today, *criollos* are gradually able to challenge them.

I argue that entrepreneurialism offers *criollos* new avenues to achieve this. Both as practice and as an attitude, entrepreneurialism is a socially sanctioned and encouraged *way of being*. In the Argentine public and political discourse, it is also celebrated as an *Argentine way of being*. To be an entrepreneur implies being a productive, contributing, and 'legitimate' member of the society. If historically, *criollos*' skin color and geographical and cultural roots have kept them on the bottom of class-race hierarchies, being –and self-identifying as– an entrepreneur today helps them improve their socioeconomic position and aspire for a 'middle-class lifestyle.'

By focusing on "criollo entrepreneurialism," this dissertation contributes to research on social transformations in terms of social mobility and race, and their contentious relationship. Entrepreneurialism as an analytical lens helps to expand and advance that field. It allows for a simultaneous analysis on both race and class as dynamic and fluid, mutually constitutive social constructs. Further, my research also aims to push the geographical frontier of class and race-related research in Argentina, where anthropological inquiries on class tend to focus on the urban and economic centers –not the country's poor hinterlands.



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## Table of Contents

<b>Introduction</b> .....	<b>3</b>
<b><i>I: Introducing the field</i></b> .....	<b>4</b>
Santiago’s different sides .....	7
(i).....	7
(ii).....	10
(iii).....	11
<b><i>II: Economic and political context</i></b> .....	<b>14</b>
The boom .....	14
The crisis before the boom.....	16
<i>Corralito</i> in Santiago.....	17
Consumer citizen; aspiring middle-class citizen.....	18
Entrepreneurial citizen .....	20
<b><i>III: Chapter contents, research design and methods</i></b> .....	<b>23</b>
Ethnographic sites in chapters.....	24
Chapter 1: “Legitimacy contested: Criollo entrepreneurs and the white middle-class” .....	24
Chapter 2: “Forms of <i>capital</i> and the ‘entrepreneurial framework’ of race, class, and status” .....	25
Chapter 3: “Body work and social capital among triathletes” .....	26
Chapter 4: “Between aspirations and progress: entrepreneurialism in a women’s cooperative” .....	28
Chapter 5: “Cultural capital, status, and legitimacy: mixed-race <i>Santiagoños</i> in higher education” .....	30
Methods.....	32
Beyond the methods.....	35
<b>Chapter 1: Legitimacy contested: criollo entrepreneurs and the white middle-class</b> .....	<b>39</b>
<i>Chapter structure</i> .....	42
<i>The origins of the project</i> .....	44
<i>Criollo and the Argentine criollo</i> .....	48
<i>Authenticity contested: the case of Upianita</i> .....	51
<i>White, prosperous Argentina</i> .....	58
<i>The marginalized racial other and the making of the middle-class Argentina</i> .....	61
<i>Origin narratives: mythical facts and alternative stories</i> .....	65
<i>Entrepreneurial empowerment and claims to legitimacy</i> .....	71
<i>Conclusion</i> .....	78
<b>Chapter 2: Forms of <i>capital</i> and the ‘entrepreneurial framework’ of race, class, and status</b> .....	<b>82</b>
<i>Introduction</i> .....	82
<i>Chapter structure</i> .....	86
<b><i>I: On Bourdieu: where class and status meet and merge</i></b> .....	<b>88</b>
<b><i>II: Social space and capital</i></b> .....	<b>98</b>
Social capital .....	100
Cultural capital .....	102

<i>III: Aspirational social mobility and the quest to middle-classness</i> .....	107
<i>IV: Race, ethnicity, and the parameters of whiteness</i> .....	110
<i>V: Race to socioeconomic mobility</i> .....	115
<i>VI: Entrepreneurialism and the neoliberal way of the world</i> .....	118
<i>Conclusion</i> .....	124
<b>Chapter 3: Body work and social capital among triathletes</b> .....	<b>128</b>
<i>Introduction</i> .....	128
<i>Meeting Mario and arriving in Ironsport</i> .....	132
<i>Ironsport: a site for revolution</i> .....	135
<i>A gym, a track, and a coffee place</i> .....	139
<i>The ‘sporting field’</i> .....	141
<i>The interactive sporting field</i> .....	146
<i>“You’re not a model; you’re an athlete!”</i> .....	150
<i>Under surveillance; under construction</i> .....	154
<i>Discipline and approval</i> .....	159
<i>Entrepreneurial athletes</i> .....	162
<i>The lifestyle entrepreneur</i> .....	169
<i>Conclusion</i> .....	173
<b>Chapter 4: Between aspirations and progress: entrepreneurialism in a women’s cooperative</b> .....	<b>176</b>
<i>Introduction</i> .....	176
<i>Chapter structure</i> .....	181
<i>Arriving in the Cooperativa Integral de Santiago del Estero</i> .....	184
<i>Institutional context</i> .....	190
<i>Cooperative entrepreneurialism in times of neoliberalism</i> .....	194
<i>Entrepreneurial identity: from an informal worker to an entrepreneur in a gendered ‘laborscape’</i> .....	201
<i>The cooperative as a platform for mobility and progress</i> .....	207
<i>Gendered entrepreneurialism</i> .....	212
<b>Chapter 5: Cultural capital, status, and legitimacy: mixed-race Santiagueños in higher education</b> .....	<b>227</b>
<i>Introduction</i> .....	227
<i>Chapter structure</i> .....	234
<i>Laboratorio de Antropología, Universidad Nacional de Santiago del Estero</i> .....	236
<i>The university is for everybody. In Argentina, everybody is white</i> .....	240
<i>Democratizing education; perpetuating socioeconomic inequality</i> .....	243
<i>University, militancy, and legitimacy: the case of Jorge</i> .....	250
<i>University, legitimacy, identity: the case of Fátima</i> .....	256
<i>Capitalizing on education: the case of Matías</i> .....	263

<i>Conclusion</i> .....	269
<b>Conclusion</b> .....	<b>273</b>
<i>Part I: The ‘what?’</i> .....	273
<i>Part II: The ‘so what?’</i> .....	276
<i>Part III: The ‘how?’</i> .....	281
<i>Part III: Final thoughts</i> .....	287
<b>Bibliography</b> .....	<b>290</b>

## Introduction

“I have an evil sister who says I’m a *negra*,” María says with her face dead serious. We are at a café in the center of Santiago del Estero –a city in North-Western Argentina where, at the time I am interviewing María, I have conducted research for nearly a year. María is 57 and works as a domestic employee. By the time she brings up her evil sister, she has told me that her roots are in the interior of Santiago del Estero’s province and that she is *bien criolla* (very criolla). Criolla/o in the Argentine context usually means a mixed-race person. *Negra/o*, as used by María’s sister, is an insult implying that one is poor, lazy, ignorant or, perhaps, a societal parasite or a drug-consuming delinquent. While *negro/a* in Spanish literally means a black person, in Santiago and Argentina, the term is employed mostly in its pejorative sense, and the people it is used against are usually mixed-race. I have never heard a (phenotypically) white person being called *negro/a*, although I have heard white people being compared to *negros/as*. The comparison implies that the white person is truly poor and truly lazy; truly disinterested in improving her socioeconomic position. Then María continues:

My sister and I don’t get along, I mean, obviously she calls me *negra* just to insult me...*Negros* live off [social] plans and if you put one obstacle on their path, they just stay put and complain...I’ve worked my entire life, 39 years with the same family...and still, I’ve raised two children by myself and when my salary hasn’t been enough, I’ve made food and baked and sold to my neighbors. You know my neighborhood, right?, *Siglo XXI*, so you know it’s full of *negros*...look, they’re lazy, zero entrepreneurial, they don’t even try to progress. They’ll stay there in *Siglo XXI*...I mean, look at my son now, he’s left the neighborhood and is now an entrepreneur. In our society there are rich people and poor people, but if you’re poor, you just have to fight to progress. Nobody gives you anything for free and those [social] plans... honestly, I can’t stand people who live off [social] plans.

María's interview excerpt is a fitting start for this dissertation, which investigates social mobility and changing cultural understandings of race, class, and status in Santiago del Estero, northern Argentina. María emphasizes that she is a criolla but definitely not a *negra*, alluding to the categories of race and class that are not simply intertwined but actually mutually constitutive. Then she mentions her son, an entrepreneur, as an example of a person who has been able to leave the family's deprived conditions in a neighborhood notorious for being poor and dangerous. Finally, she also states that to have any chance of progressing economically, one must be "entrepreneurial." In the nearly three-hours long interview, María's life history turns into an image that depicts Santiago's deeply rooted maladies, such as inequality, socioeconomic stagnation, and ethno-racial discrimination. But the image also reveals a colorful landscape of economic aspirations and hopes for upward mobility. She wants her children to be *somebody* in the society rather than *nobody*. She is enormously proud of her son, who she says has inherited her entrepreneurial attitude and who is now a university student with his own budding business. Throughout the interview, she speaks about her life with defiance, as if asserting her family's presence in Santiago's social map in ways that one generation ago would have been impossible.

## **I: Introducing the field**

This dissertation examines the architecture of social mobility among criollos in Santiago del Estero, Argentina. Santiago del Estero is the capital city of a homonymous province, with a population of 280,000. It is located 660 miles to the north-west from Buenos Aires. From here on, I call Santiago del Estero simply "Santiago," and unless I say otherwise, by "Santiago" I mean the city. I conducted my dissertation fieldwork in Santiago between September 2016 and

December 2017. I also spent a total of four months there in 2014 and 2015 doing preliminary research. However, as I explain later in this introduction, my history in Santiago started in 2000, when I spent a year there as an exchange student. Thus, the processes of socioeconomic transformations that I investigate are also realities that I have observed prior to my academic research.

How mixed-race people, i.e. criollos, aspire for, construct, and experience ascent on Santiago's socioeconomic ladder? I argue that moving upwards on that ladder correlates with transforming racial and class identities, and, crucially, with being and being seen as *entrepreneurial*. They also contest traditional Argentine imaginaries of upward mobility. Imaginaries of upward mobility in Argentina are marked by racial undertones. They hierarchize class structures on the basis of race, and cultural and geographical origins, often associating intergenerational class mobility with European immigrant ancestry and being white. However, by embracing entrepreneurialism as an ethos as much as a practice, criollos, who can hardly claim to have European origins or to be white, can challenge the racialized class hierarchies (and conceptions of race structured around understandings of class) that have previously impeded them from leaving the society's margins. What is at stake in "criollo entrepreneurialism" is social status. It means carving out a space and constructing a presence in Santiago's social map that affords criollos legitimacy as citizens and indirectly reflects in their changing class position.



I analyze social mobility, entrepreneurialism, and status-building through the lens of physical, social, cultural, and economic capital, and situate the analysis in four principal field sites: A sports and triathlon club called Ironsport; an artisanal cooperative run by women; the National University of Santiago del Estero (UNSE), and a folkloric tourist fair called Upianita. I approached each ethnographic site through a theoretical focus on one or two specific forms of capital. For example, at UNSE, I examined the role of cultural capital in criollo students' aspirations for social mobility. At the triathlon club, in turn, I focused on the building of physical capital and its relationship with social capital, and how these two together can improve young criollo athletes' social status. The main ethnographic chapters –one, three, four, and five– are each dedicated to one specific place.

My project contributes to the anthropological research on class, status, and race. By interrogating the relationship between social mobility, entrepreneurialism, and racial and class identities, this dissertation offers insight to how people from marginalized societal sectors can challenge widely shared understandings of class. Moreover, to focus on entrepreneurialism and to think about class through that lens challenges the traditional, vertically orchestrated class systems that people from politicians to economists use to structure and control the society. Entrepreneurialism as neoliberalism's most prized phenomenon embodies the idea of social mobility. At the same time, and perhaps due to today's neoliberal world order, entrepreneurialism has become democratized and increasingly available across the class spectrum as a social identity. Moreover, in certain countries, entrepreneurialism is not only encouraged by the state but has become a *project* of the state. This tendency is notable in countries where people are particularly dependent on self-employment due to the lack of public



funds or a functioning welfare state.<sup>1</sup> Regardless of the governments' ideological orientation, private entrepreneurship is seen as at least a partial solution to quandaries of economic growth. As this dissertation aims to demonstrate, the ubiquity of entrepreneurialism potentially impacts people's social identities. Hence it also reflects in how people build their sense of self in relation to, say, their race or gender. In Argentina and beyond, entrepreneurialism therefore serves as a wonderful analytical vehicle for studying how racially marginalized people can defy some of the socially established barriers that impede them to experience socioeconomic ascent.

The first section of this introduction provides a view onto the socioeconomic and cultural landscape that surrounds my research. I start by presenting Santiago, considering both its positive and negative attributes. I then discuss the national political and economic transformations that contextualize my research project, e.g. the economic crisis of 2001-2002, the subsequent recovery, and the changes in the national political and economic agendas since the crisis. The second section introduces the contents of this dissertation and my research methodology. I describe each of the chapters while also discussing my field sites, how I discovered them, and how I conducted my research there.

### **Santiago's different sides**

#### **(i)**

Santiago's central plaza, renovated in 2014, is dotted with orange trees. When the orange season nears its end in August, the fruit start falling to the ground. The oranges hit the ground like small hand grenades that explode with juice, and while some are rotten when they fall, they

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<sup>1</sup> See Ruiz et al. for a discussion on the state's encouragement of entrepreneurship in Peru, where it is estimated that 25% of the population are engaged in some form of entrepreneurial activities. Further, Kelley et al. offer a birds-eye-view on global 'ecosystems' for entrepreneurship, drawing general conclusions from 62 different economies. The economies they analyze are mostly from developing countries, where entrepreneurship is considered first and foremost necessity and opportunity-driven.

nevertheless exude a fresh, citrus fragrance that fills the plaza. Every night, municipal workers clean away the smashed oranges. It is quite remarkable how efficient the municipality is with its city maintenance, given that some ten years ago there were hardly any garbage bins on the streets, let alone any organized force to keep the streets clean. Other parts of the city and especially the center –an area of about eight by eight streets– are clean, too. Bordering the plaza and in the nearby streets there are countless cafés and restaurants that fill with people in the mornings and evenings: Santiagueños, as people from Santiago are called, are known for going out for coffee, a meal, or drinks as often as possible. Besides cafes and restaurants, the center is full of small boutiques and stores. Many of them mark the pedestrian areas which surround the plaza. In 2013, the municipality started placing traffic lights in the center. Until then, there had been none. More interesting than the traffic lights themselves was that people, pedestrians and drivers alike, actually obeyed them. Santiago is renowned for its ‘relaxed’ traffic culture.



One of the cities pedestrian streets

The city’s main park, Parque Aguirre, is just a few blocks from the central plaza. Enormous eucalyptus trees dominate the park, shielding it from the scorching sun. In the early morning one can find gardeners pruning the small trees and during the dry season, irrigating the

soil. The park ends at the riverbank of Río Dulce, a river that runs through the province and also delineates Santiago's eastern border and separates it from its so-called sister city, La Banda. Over the last decade, the riverbank area has witnessed constant improvements. Connected to the park, it now has paved paths for runners, walkers, and cyclists. The paths even have streetlights. As of 2019, Santiago's provincial government is continuing to build a new soccer stadium by the riverside road, a couple of miles from the principal park areas. The stadium, which has been under construction since 2017, promises to be massive. It also promises to become one of the sites to host the Pan-American Soccer Cup in 2022. My conversations with locals revealed a stark division between how people felt about the stadium. Some deemed the construction as the culmination of all corruption and if nothing else, an absolute waste of money that should be spent on new schools and hospitals instead. Others argued that the corruption notwithstanding, the stadium is precisely what Santiago needs in order to attract visitors and gain positive reputation in and outside the country.



Río Dulce

## (ii)

“Why on earth did you come/go *here/there*?” The number of times I have had to answer this question in Santiago and elsewhere in Argentina is incalculable. The place does not have the most flattering reputation in the country, and it is considered an integral part of Argentina’s remote hinterlands. When seen from Argentina’s economic centers –whether Buenos Aires and its surroundings;<sup>2</sup> Rosario, or Santa Fe–, Santiago is not only *in* the periphery but in many ways, epitomizes it. In other words, besides its geographic location, Santiago is considered both culturally and socioeconomically peripheral; even unimportant.<sup>3</sup> It is not the place in Argentina where foreigners –tourists, students or professionals– would be likely or expected to travel to as their first destination (or the second or the third, for that matter). Why, then, does Santiago have this reputation?

Santiago is poor. It contributes a meager 3% to the national exports (Ministry of Development 2015), its human development index ranks it on the bottom of Argentina’s 23 provinces (The United Nations 2017), and the history of its internal economy and political power structure reads like a casebook example of polarization and inequality (Picco 2015). Further, Santiago’s territory consists predominantly of dry flatland covered by dense short-grown forest and bush. Its climate is notorious for uncomfortably hot summers, typical of the semi-arid Gran

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<sup>2</sup> Buenos Aires the province and capital together with the surrounding Pampas region constitute 40% of Argentina’s total population of nearly 45 million inhabitants (INDEC 2018).

<sup>3</sup> To think about a country through the lens of traditional “center-periphery” model (as developed by Immanuel Wallerstein in the 1970s) is problematic. The rigidness of global economic relations the model originally presupposed can be easily problematized by looking at today’s capital flows that transcend nation-states. Further, the reduction of the so-called periphery into a passive subject in global relations –and local– relations merits to be scrutinized. Here I used the terms center and periphery to emphasize the belittling associations that people in big cities and wealthy provinces such as Buenos Aires and Rosario or Santa Fe and Córdoba, tend to have with Santiago. My research on the whole does not intend to erase those deeply rooted associations –I consider that a mission impossible. But my research does attempt to show why the processes of social stratification and cultural transformations in Santiago should not be dismissed as irrelevant in relation to similar processes elsewhere in the country.

Chaco area that Santiago forms part of. During the austral summer, between October and February, temperatures often rise above 110F. The frequent heat waves usually end with thunderstorms and torrential rains that flood the city for at least a couple of days. Finally, most Santiagueños are dark-skinned, mixed-race *criollos*. The ethno-racial realities in Santiago defy the myth of Argentina being built (mostly) by European immigrants between the mid-19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Santiago hardly received European (or other) immigrants during the Great Migration period (1880-1930) and of its population in 1914,<sup>4</sup> a meager 5,4% were foreign born. In Buenos Aires, that figure at the time stood at 30%. Thus, Santiago has been and is still seen as a place of *Indios* (indigenous) and *criollos*; the ‘barbaric’ hinterlands whose inhabitants are ‘unencumbered’ by civilization.<sup>5</sup> Today, the national imaginaries that conceive of Santiago’s place in the peripheries of all sorts, persist –but perhaps not as stubbornly as they have historically. As I describe earlier, in many ways, Santiago has grown. It has embellished its infrastructural façade while also improving its social infrastructure from schools to healthcare. These transformations are largely due to the province’s economic boom between 2005 and 2015. I will elaborate on Santiago’s economic growth later in this chapter.

**(iii)**

“Did you actually *choose* to come to here?” an informant of mine incredulously asked when I told her how I had first arrived in Santiago, many years earlier. The short answer is, no. I was simply sent there by a student exchange agency through which I went to Argentina for a year as an exchange student, from 2000 to 2001. I never expressed any wish regarding *where* in

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<sup>4</sup> Last census I could find on Santiago’s foreign-born population is that of 1914 (in Tasso 2003). The subsequent national census conducted in 1947 gives no data on this.

<sup>5</sup> See Oscar Chamosa’s *Breve historia del folklore Argentino (1920-1970)* (2012) for a discussion on how Northern Argentina became seen as a culturally isolated region, which, nevertheless, grew famous for being the cradle of Argentine folklore.

Argentina I wanted to go, and even if I had, it probably would not have mattered. I arrived in Santiago in early January 2000, in an afternoon when the temperature had risen to 113F; 45C according to the airport's thermometer. I have not forgotten it for it was the highest outside temperature I had ever felt, having spent my childhood in Finland. I remember how at the airport nobody spoke English; even less so my host family who had come to pick me up. Yet everybody smiled, talked at me enthusiastically in a language I neither spoke nor understood, and –such is the magic of Santiago and Santiagueños– made me feel welcome.

Although Santiago was –and is– the most important city in the province, twenty years ago it still had the atmosphere of a large but tranquil village. In the evenings, as the temperatures cooled down and the dusk set in, neighbors would gather on the streets to sit on white plastic chairs and talk and drink *mate*.<sup>6</sup> People knew their neighbors, vegetable sellers, butchers and bakers by name, and in the center, one would frequently bump into an acquaintance or a friend and stop for a chat. The Santiago I learned to know was not the most beautiful town on earth: it had few paved roads, derelict infrastructure and more street dogs than inhabitants. But such aesthetic shortfalls did not stop people from enjoying and spending time in public spaces. The only time life in the streets would really come to a halt was during the five hours of commercial siesta in the middle of the day, when even the street dogs would somehow disappear.

As my exchange year in Santiago carried on, I learned to understand why Santiagueños deemed it strange that a foreigner –especially a European– would move to their city. My high school, which a generation earlier had been the best public school in the city, was mostly in a state of chaos. Students came in and walked out of the classroom as they pleased, and any quiz or exam was considered a collective effort of copying. For the approximately 45 students in my

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<sup>6</sup> *Mate* is an herbal infusion made with *yerba mate*. One drinks it with a metal straw (*bombilla*) from a round cup that used to be made from carved butternut squash (*mate*).

class there were rarely more than 35 desks and chairs. Three of the four windows in the classroom were a little broken and the fourth one did not have a windowpane at all. In the summer, before the vacation started, the temperatures outside made sitting in the fan-less classroom infernal. And during the winter, when the mornings were close to freezing, one had to wear at least three or four layers of clothes with the school uniform tucked somewhere in between. Teachers' strikes in those days were a frequent celebration for students. Bus strikes were less of a celebration. But they, too, were rather common; a nuisance one simply had to accept. The more Spanish I learned, the more I began to realize how much discontent the everyday financial struggles and political corruption scandals generated. People across the socioeconomic spectrum, to the extent I could tell, seemed to think that most basic services, such as healthcare, education and public transportation, were simply dysfunctional. It seemed that the people were right.



My exchange year ended in the middle of January 2001. I left 11 months before a catastrophic economic crisis hit Argentina, throwing off balance its internal and external economy, political power structure, and the lives of millions of ordinary citizens. Families that I knew lost their savings; some of my schoolmates' parents lost their jobs. For nearly two years, Argentines had all their financial affairs –from withdrawing cash to investing abroad– strictly controlled and limited by the national central bank. During those two years, the government changed five times. I went back to Santiago in 2004. Nestor Kirchner had become the president a year earlier and the national economy was recovering. Santiago, too, was witnessing the end of an authoritative political regime and it seemed likely that the province would soon have a governor from the same leftist party that President Kirchner represented. In 2004, I remember that people who I knew were not only excited about the promise of change; they seemed outright optimistic.

## **II: Economic and political context**

### **The boom**

In 2005, an overwhelming majority of Santiagueños elected Gerardo Zamora as the new governor of the province. Zamora was a staunch supporter and a close ally of president Kirchner. Zamora's friendly ties with the federal government resonated throughout the province and reflected, for example, in the province's acquisition of new agricultural contracts. The oilseed industry along with cotton, fruit, and livestock farming grew with Santiago's exports soaring nearly 500% between 2003 and 2014 (Provincial report, Ministry of Economy, 2015). These were largely due to the rapidly increasing demand from China, which contributed to Argentina's



economic growth on the whole during Kirchner's presidency. Further, federal loans with low interest rates arrived in the province hand-in-hand with national and international investment, leading to a rapid development in nearly all socioeconomic sectors from education to health, urban planning, and infrastructure, among others. Thus, between 2005 and 2015, the provincial economy improved unlike ever before.

The boom did not make Santiago wealthy, but it did make it less poor. The economic growth had a positive impact on Santiago's position in the Northern region on the whole (the poorest region in the country), and also furthered investment in its nascent tourist industry. For example, the mega construction of a road circuit in Termas de Rio Hondo, a touristy city an hour from Santiago, hosts an annual Gran Prix motorcycle race. It has made Santiago's name famous among motor sports enthusiasts around the world and fills Termas and Santiago with tourists during the Gran Prix weekend in April. Wider exposure in the media has strengthened the province's position as a developing tourist destination that also emphasizes its cultural history and folklore culture, i.e. regional foods, music, handicrafts and textile work, etc. The boom lifted large sectors of the society from poverty, opening doors for such sectors to start considering themselves as middle- or lower middle-class. Growing labor markets (e.g. in the construction industry) and new educational opportunities (e.g. through the expansion of higher education institutions to the province's interior, and federal financial aid for higher education students) were important structural elements in reshaping Santiago's socioeconomic organization. In material terms, having access to low-interest loans for property, capital to start one's own business, or credit to buy goods such as phones and computers, was no longer a distant dream but a reality that the changing economic context made possible. The most direct beneficiaries of these opportunities were those with scarce economic resources; that is, criollos.

## The crisis before the boom

The period of these economic changes, 2005-2015, was preceded by one of Argentina's worst economic catastrophes, the 2001-02 cash crisis. Inflation had been on the rise since the late 1990s as a consequence of the president Carlos Menem's neoliberal economic agenda. During his presidency 1989 to 1999, the country underwent a wave of privatization and economic restructuring plans facilitated and financed –through massive loans– by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank. While at first these measures helped Argentina to recover from its previous period of hyper-inflation in 1989, from the late 1990s on, the soaring external debt and dwindling internal production and exports began to reveal their devastating effect on the economy. When Menem stepped down and Fernando De la Rúa became the president in 1999, the financial crisis seemed inevitable. De la Rúa's acquisition of more IMF-provided loans did little to help the situation. What had also exacerbated the economic downward spiral was the convertibility plan, which in 1991 had tied the Argentine peso to the US dollar. This odd union was formed to stabilize the economy and rid the country of the plague of inflation. Eventually, however, the plan contributed to a massive cash deficit and the expansion of the financial bubble (Grimson & Kessler 2014). That bubble broke when the crisis, known as *el corralito*,<sup>7</sup> hit in December 2001. The federal government ordered bank accounts frozen to impede the outflux of dollars and cancelled the peso-dollar convertibility plan. From one day to another, people's savings in dollars were turned into savings in Argentine pesos –and the value of peso plummeted. The professional, white-collar sectors who were accustomed to vacationing abroad and had enrolled their children in private schools were forced to economize,

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<sup>7</sup> *Corralito* means literally a small (animal) enclosure. This informal name given to the crisis alludes to the restrictive measures the government took in managing the crisis, most notably by freezing almost all bank accounts and prohibiting money extraction from accounts that had been registered in US dollars during the convertibility plan. After the initial bank account freezing, citizens were allowed to withdraw 250 pesos per week.

scaling down the lifestyle that had placed them in the socioeconomic bracket of the middle class or buttressed their status as middle-class citizens. As the economic crisis wore on, they descended to the bracket of the ‘new poor’ (cf. Minujín & Anguita 2004). Thus, across the country, the crisis became seen as a crisis of the middle class.

### ***Corralito in Santiago***

During my research visits to Santiago, I often mentioned *el corralito* in my interviews and everyday conversations. I expected to hear memories of personal bankruptcy and societal devastation, which I knew had touched some people I had known since my exchange year. It was surprising to find out that the crisis had impacted Santiagueños’ lives much less than I had assumed. Many would think for a second before saying that “it wasn’t easy” but that “it wasn’t that bad either” (*no era fácil – tampoco tan difícil*), or indicate they understood it had been harmful for the society, but for them personally, it had not been a disaster. A local economist Federico Scrimini explained this seemingly odd discrepancy along class lines. He claimed it was a crisis that affected the poor to a lesser degree than the previous crises that had been marked by hyperinflations because the poor did not have their savings in dollars –most did not even have bank accounts. Further, Scrimini argued, by virtue of working mostly in the informal sector, their salaries were not subject to institutional cuts. Commentary from Santiagueños who I discussed with supported Scrimini’s explanation, as many ironically asked how Santiagueños could have become the ‘new poor’ when most of them were poor already. Yet these statements also concealed a contradiction. Especially after the central bank had frozen people’s accounts and prohibited money withdrawals that would exceed 250 pesos per week, the circulation of cash decreased drastically. Those living off the informal economy, such as domestic employees or

undocumented construction workers, received their salaries in cash. Thus, if the employers' access to cash was suddenly restricted, how could the poor not be affected by it? I realized only later that I should have brought this up in my conversations with Scrimini. But it also made me wonder how people's memories are affected by the passage of time – could people have appropriated the generally shared narratives about the effects the crisis bore on the middle classes and simply sidelined other perspectives? Or, did I only talk to people whose experiences of the crisis had not been so catastrophic? I do not have a clear answer to these questions. What is certain is that there was a narrow sector of the society who did not suffer but, on the contrary, benefitted from the crisis. The wealthy who had invested in international companies or abroad had their investments shielded by national borders. The money secured beyond those borders was not within the government's or the central bank's reach.

### **Consumer citizen; aspiring middle-class citizen**

The radical changes that Nestor Kirchner introduced to the management of economic affairs in Argentina were welcomed by the public. His political and economic agenda relied on a simple formula: generate employment and incentivize consumption. Dovetailing other regional progressive governments, the *Kirchnerists*<sup>8</sup> aim was to increase the popular and lower middle classes' consumption capacity by creating jobs and raising wages, thereby establishing a “pact of consumption” between the state and the citizens (Boos 2017). The construction of a consumer citizen (*ciudadano consumidor*) undergirded the success of the neoliberal model of the 1990s. This approach emphasized an individual's freedom of choice in the open commodity markets,

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<sup>8</sup> Nestor Kirchner did not seek re-election in 2007. Instead his wife, Cristina Kirchner, was elected as the country's new president. The 12 years the Kirchners' rule (Nestor Kirchner died in 2010) became known as the *Kirchnerist* rule, *Kirchnerism* referring to the socialist-Peronist ideology that characterized both Nestor and Christina Kirchners' governments.

marked by the suppressed role of state intervention. During *Kirchnerism*, however, the state –not the private markets– became the driving force behind the making of a consumer citizen (Rosaenz 2017), becoming the regulator of a novel social contract. It acted as the guarantor of employment and capital through the expanding public sector, national industry, and state institutions. These generated jobs, which kept money in circulation and enabled citizens to keep on consuming. The citizens, in turn, offered their support (i.e. vote) to those who represented the State (Boos 2017, Rozaens 2017; Svampa 2005, 2011). The government also devised incentives that would further stimulate consumption, such as credit plans with interest-free payment quotas, and financing plans for selected goods. Within this schema, the model of a middle-class citizen became tightly intertwined with the consumer citizen,<sup>9</sup> and the growth of the middle classes therefore was seen as a desired corollary of the *Kirchnerist* “pact of consumption” (Boos 2017).

The consumption boom took hold in Santiago, where credit and financing plans found a particularly fertile market. Within a short span of time, goods that had been relatively luxurious suddenly became available for those who earlier could have only dreamt about ever owning them. A bakery worker could now buy a motorcycle and then a car; a domestic employee could buy a washing machine for her own house, and a cooperative worker could save capital to open a shop. While material consumption among Santiago’s (previously) poor proliferated, acquisition of *stuff* also came to represent and signify a nascent, future-oriented “capacity to aspire” (Appadurai 2004; Miller 2010). That is, the ability to decipher relationships between power, material resources, and social status, and to relate these to the specific objects and outcomes of

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<sup>9</sup> See Maureen O’Dougherty’s *Consumption Intensified* (2002) in which she examines the consumption practices of Brazilians who self-identified as middle-class during an intense economic crisis in the early 1990s. In contrast with post-crisis Argentina’s where the state played a major role in encouraging consumption, in Brazil in some sectors of consumption culture the case was the opposite: purchasing of e.g. foreign goods took place in the margins of legality, in response to the government’s restrictions.

aspiration (Appadurai, 2004:68). The idea of aspiration, then, sits at the heart of middle-classness. Or, as Moises Kopper (2016) argues, the middle class is an aspirational category that is sandwiched between ambitions to become (or continue to be) upwardly mobile and fears of losing one's social position as a middle-class citizen. As an invisible, cultural force, aspiration configures middle-class identities and behavior, while being intertwined with global concrete and symbolic markers that indicate middle-classness. These markers are tightly linked to consumption, education, and cultural taste and practices (cf. Bourdieu 2010). In Santiago, I learned about my informants' definitions of the middle class. Being middle class denoted property, stability and, importantly, future planning on the bases of what one had (e.g. property; savings) and what one aspired to have (e.g. education; a good job). What was novel in Santiago was the racial composition of the population who now were able to ride on credit towards better material conditions and aspire for middle-classness. It did not fit in the local (and Argentine) matrix of race and class relations.

### **Entrepreneurial citizen**

The *Kirchnerist* governments not only encouraged consumption as an integral part of their economic agenda, but also placed the idea of entrepreneurialism as a central feature of their model of a booming national economy (Adamovsky 2017). And just as the state played a crucial role in constructing the *Kirchnerist* figure of a post-neoliberal consumer citizen, it also supported the emergence of an 'entrepreneurial citizen.' The government established a series of programs and financial aid plans deemed as socio-productive, socio-economic and labor-oriented (DeSena & Chahbenderian 2011). For example, it created new and expanded existing incentive programs that provided training, loans and start-up money to young entrepreneurs and owners of small and medium-sized enterprises. The government also focused on creating educational opportunities to

students and graduates who aimed to start their own business. Among the labor-oriented initiatives, the state set up programs that emphasized equality of opportunities rooted in organized, communitarian work (ibid.). One of such state-supported plans, and arguably the most celebrated one, was *Argentina Trabaja* (Argentina Works), established in 2009. It was a program that incentivized unemployed or low-paid informal workers to set up cooperatives. These cooperatives tended to focus on public maintenance, whether clearing construction sites or cleaning public spaces. But there were also cooperatives that engaged in profit-seeking entrepreneurship, such as making and selling artisanal or agricultural products. The general goal of *Argentina Trabaja* was to help these cooperatives to eventually become self-sustaining enterprises. Encouraging entrepreneurship through cooperatives stood in stark contrast with the idea of an autonomous, business-driven individual entrepreneur –the ‘self-made man’– whom the previous liberal government had consecrated as the epitome of a successful capitalist. What the *Kirchnerist* model aimed for instead was the expansion of entrepreneurialism from practice to an attitude; a way of being that would foment economic production and, moreover, consumption.

The current center-right, neoliberal government, in power since December 2015, has further centralized entrepreneurialism as a key aspect of an economically functional, modern society.<sup>10</sup> Nation-wide publicity campaigns and training platforms for young and aspiring start-up pioneers have succeeded in turning the noun ‘entrepreneur’ or the adjective ‘entrepreneurial’ into a commonplace self-identification. An owner of a supermarket, a corner store, or a small bakery can all be entrepreneurs. An apt example of these programs is a campaign launched by the city government of Buenos Aires in 2015. Advertisements on buses, inside the metro stations, or in large billboards contained succinct messages about the benefits of

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<sup>10</sup> An added footnote in November 2019: the government changed in October 2019. Argentina’s current president is a Peronist (leftist) Alberto Fernandez.

entrepreneurialism. What I recall the best was: “Achieve your dreams; become an entrepreneur.” On a federal level, the secretary of entrepreneurialism, lodged in the ministry of production, cultivate multiple entrepreneurship-related programs. For example, *Academia Argentina Emprende* focuses on providing professional support for entrepreneurs with small and medium-sized business. They give workshops in universities in different parts of the country while also offering online assistance with matters such as human resources or accountancy.<sup>11</sup> On a local level, provinces and cities celebrate the day of the entrepreneur through entrepreneurs’ fairs and expositions.<sup>12</sup>

For mixed-race Santiagueños, becoming an entrepreneur offers the chances to start building a new kind of social identity. Emerging from the society’s margins as citizens with entrepreneurial projects and aspirations makes it possible for criollos to be *seen* as something much more than poor, lazy, and uncivilized. This became evident in my conversations with people who identified as white and middle-class when they referred to somebody, e.g. their domestic employee, as “poor *but very* entrepreneurial.” While the current economic landscape in Argentina is increasingly alarming –a situation that has taken a dramatic turn especially since the early 2018–, understandings of entrepreneurialism as an attitude and even as a moral principle, remain in place. Against this backdrop, as this dissertation suggests, being an entrepreneur or entrepreneurial, has turned into a societal category that serves as an organic environment for mixed-race Santiagueños to access and generate social, cultural, and economic capital. This

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<sup>11</sup> See: (<http://academia.produccion.gob.ar/> 2019).

<sup>12</sup> Similar kinds of campaigns and programs exist across the continent. The government of Chile, for example, has launched campaigns through its *Programa de Apoyo al Entorno Eprendedor* (Support for Entrepreneurial Environments program) that advertise public support for entrepreneurs. Private foundations, such as *fundación Emprender* in Chile or *Peru Emprende* bring together various companies which, in turn, offer assistance, financing, and professionalization courses for small-scale entrepreneurs. They, too, use diverse media and public campaigns to disseminate their message (<https://www.fundacionemprender.cl/> ; <http://www.peru-emprende.pe/> 2019)



affords them a social status that overrides the importance and traditional models of being middle-class.

### **III: Chapter contents, research design and methods**

I conducted my research in four principal sites: a tourist folklore fair outside Santiago called Upianita, a triathlon and sports club called Ironsport, a women's cooperative called La Cooperativa Integral de Santiado del estero, Santiago's public university, *la Universidad Nacional de Santiado del Estero* (UNSE). These ethnographic sites revealed how local cultural models of socioeconomic mobility and being mixed-race had changed –and were changing– since the early 2000. My informants at Ironsport, the cooperative, the UNSE and at Upianita showed different iterations of entrepreneurialism and aspects of being entrepreneurial. They also contested the racial(ized) class categories that allocated criollos in the society's deprived periphery characterized by stagnation. In many ways, my informants' narratives and practices suggested that one's social status in an environment of economic growth was less tied to bases of middle-classness (or any other class position) than to one's entrepreneurial outlook and attitude. This does not mean that the importance of being middle-class would have been erased from the local understandings of social hierarchies. However, I discovered that the aspirations for becoming middle-class were less explicitly stated than the aspirations to be entrepreneurial and self-identification as an entrepreneur.

## Ethnographic sites in chapters

### Chapter 1: “Legitimacy contested: Criollo entrepreneurs and the white middle-class”

This dissertation opens with a chapter on racial and class identity construction among Santiago’s criollos. I examine how race and class relations in Argentina and specifically in Santiago have evolved over time and how they have shaped (and been shaped by) socioeconomic hierarchies. These relations also contextualize the making of racial identities which I explore first through university students’ projects on their ancestry and then through one of my ethnographic research sites, Upianita. As the case examples show, criollo-ness is understood and explained largely through one’s ancestry and in contrast with the social imaginaries of Argentina being a “country of immigrants.” Moreover, associating criollos with poverty, backwardness, and lack of development is not only a vestige of colonial hierarchies but also a product of Argentina’s modernization and the concomitant construction of its middle class. The myth about the making of modern Argentina portrays the country as European and racially white. I thus discuss the social and political factors that facilitated the making of the middle class, and how the process drew a stark boundary between the ‘legitimate’ Argentines (who were white and of European origins), and the inconvenient dark-skin *other* living in the northern hinterlands.

This *othering* has become more complicated as criollos are exploring new identities as entrepreneurs. Besides examining the meanings of racial identities in the context of Upianita, I also analyze it as a site for creating entrepreneurial identities. Being a tourist fair premised on the marketing and selling of Santiago’s regional folklore and criollo-ness, Upianita’s vendors are locals who self-identify as criollos (or, more colloquially, *mezclas*, i.e. mixtures). They make and sell typical criollo foods (*comida criolla*) and local artisan products, thereby emphasizing their criollo-ness to the tourists that arrive at the fair. But they are also savvy entrepreneurs who self-

identify as such and associate possibilities for social mobility with being entrepreneurial. It is in Upianita that I started understanding how meaningful the ideas and representations of entrepreneurialism were in my informants' aspirations to become socially mobile or to even start considering themselves as middle-class. It also laid the foundations for my subsequent ethnographic research in the triathlon club, the cooperative, and the university.

## **Chapter 2: “Forms of *capital* and the ‘entrepreneurial framework’ of race, class, and status”**

The second chapter focuses on the theoretical underpinnings of my project and how the literature has informed my research questions. It opens with an exploration of Bourdieu's concepts of social space and capital. I specifically focus on social and cultural capital, which serve as an important framework for my data analysis at the different field sites. I recognize the critique that the lens of social and cultural capital in research on social mobility, class and, above all, race has merited. Yet I also show the applicability of that lens in specific contexts where the stakes are not only about class mobility in economic terms, but about the building of social status. As my research project aims to demonstrate, a way that criollos can harness to build that status is through entrepreneurialism.

The second chapter also probes into the literature on the middle classes, both from global and Argentine perspectives. I focus particularly on research that has approached and problematized the subject of the middle class from the perspective of race and ethnicity. As I mention earlier, this research is not so much about the middle class or *being* middle class as it is about social mobility and status building on the grounds of entrepreneurialism. However, understandings and social imaginaries of middle-classness are enormously powerful in orienting how people position themselves in the class structure. My informants are not necessarily an

exception to this. Still, how they envision and narrate their place in Santiago's socioeconomic structure is more directly related to status than class. And how they articulate their understandings of that status is often marked by references to being entrepreneurial or an entrepreneur.

The last section, then, explores literature on entrepreneurialism and how the modern neoliberal world order packages the idea of entrepreneurialism as the most heroic and admirable way of being. As I discuss the construction of entrepreneurial identities, I also show how public and political discourse has succeeded in popularizing the concept, and how it has made its way into people's everyday vocabularies. The attractive idea that anybody can be an entrepreneur may be simply a discursive bubble. However, it does echo in how people talk about themselves and about others. It is as if the concept would have become a moral compass of sorts and a way to divide the society based on who is entrepreneurial and who is not rather than simply along the axes of race and class.

### **Chapter 3: "Body work and social capital among triathletes"**

Chapter three analyses the production of physical and social capital in a triathlon team and their relationship with status-building and social mobility. I examine the transactional value of these capitals and how they may be employed as status currency within the team and in the athletes' lives outside the confines of the team. The chapter tells a story of a triathlon club called Ironsport—a trendy gym with five branches at the time, owned by a former national champion triathlete. Ironsport also houses an active triathlon team who engage in high-volume, competition-oriented training. I entered the team first as an anthropologist who was interested in exploring how a niche sport like triathlon could serve as a context and platform for social mobility. But I also trained and raced with the team and represented the club Ironsport in

regional and national triathlon competitions.<sup>13</sup> Although on the surface it seemed the team was simply a group of about 30-40<sup>14</sup> trainees of different ages who practiced together, implicitly these members represented wholly different social worlds. There were those who paid up to 2000ARS (100USD at the time) per month, and those who paid nothing, i.e. the *becados* (grantees). The paying group (in 2017) included mostly well-educated people. There were, for instance, doctors, lawyers and accountants, and also businessmen (to the extent that I knew, no businesswomen). All those whom I asked about their class-identification self-identified as middle-class. The non-paying group included young athletes from deprived backgrounds. They were criollos whose dark, mixed-race complexion seemed to mark the class-race boundaries within the team. Most of the *becados* competed on a national level. To receive free training and free meal plans in a university affiliated canteen, the *becados* had to be enrolled in a higher education institution. Almost all of my key informants were studying to become physical education teachers.

The chapter describes my interviews and conversations with Ironsport's owner –the key informant who introduced me to his team– and both *becarios* and the paying members. Through my interviews and interactions with the team members, I began to think about Ironsport as a 'sporting field' constituted by the members' overlapping different social spaces. I borrow from Pierre Bourdieu's theory on social space and fields of power as I examine how the sporting field comes into being in different contexts. In the chapter, then, I discuss the sporting field

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<sup>13</sup> Although I had a strong background in long distance running and was an avid cyclist and swimmer, triathlon for me was a whole new racing discipline. But since I had found the site through learning about its *becario* –grant– program, I figured out I could integrate in the team better if I started to train with them to also participate in competitions.

<sup>14</sup> “About 30-40 trainees” is a loose estimate, mostly because some of the members trained less regularly, and some trained with the triathlon team but counted themselves as part of the running team. The monthly fee was the same in both teams, but the coaches, who got their salary from the fees, were different. Further, by the time I left the field in December 2017, the number of trainees had increased. As of August 2019, it had risen to 50.

extensively, conceptualizing it as an abstract space that concretizes as the team trains and races together, or gathers in different social occasions, e.g. barbeques or post-race drinks.

I argue that the sporting field serves as a transactional space where the triathletes engage in both physical and social capital accumulation. While I discuss the accrual of these capitals primarily through a Bordieuan framework, my analysis on specifically social capital also draws from Robert Putnam's work. The chapter, then, explores the value of physical capital as status currency that allows the members –*becarios* and the other members alike– to acquire and accumulate social capital. I also analyze the accrual of physical capital –what Loïc Wacquant (1995) calls “body work”– as a form of entrepreneurialism. The time and effort the team members invest in their training, and the constant probing of their body's limit, shows how the body itself has become one's enterprise. In that sense, the sporting field is the space that cultivates the accumulation of social and physical capital, and the body is the principal instrument for generating them.

#### **Chapter 4: “Between aspirations and progress: entrepreneurialism in a women's cooperative”**

*La Cooperativa Integral de Santiago del Estero* is a cooperative where women who self-identify as criollos, produce wooden handicrafts and sell them in local artisanal and small entrepreneurs' fairs. The fourth chapter discusses the internal workings of this cooperative and explores what I call “cooperative entrepreneurialism.” The site cultivates entrepreneurial subjectivities that emerge at the intersections of gender, income-generation (formally within the cooperative and informally elsewhere), and practices of entrepreneurship. The women work primarily with wood, making small furniture, trays, napkin holders, jewelry boxes, mirrors, etc. in their workshop. They have learnt to use carpentry tools and machinery, and they continuously

allocate a given proportion of their earnings for purchasing more material. The cooperative was founded under the aegis of *Argentina trabaja*, a federal program to foment marginal sectors' insertion into labor markets. It pays them a meager monthly salary which is topped up by what they sell – it is by no means a lucrative job. However, some of its members use their income to invest in their own small businesses –e.g. bakeries, fruit and vegetable stores– while others invest in their own or their children's studies. The women call themselves entrepreneurs. Yet their sense of entrepreneurialism is not rooted in lofty ideas about the 'self-made (wo)man' but is, instead, linked to their shared 'fighter attitude', their drive to secure themselves and their children a better future, and the collective accrual of economic capital.

The key to the chapter's analytical framework is the intersectionality between gendered labor space(s) and how oscillating between these spaces –the work in the cooperative and the informal work outside the cooperative– contributes to and shape the women's entrepreneurial subjectivities. It necessitates an examination of the relationship between class and status. While the very fact that they participate in *Argentina Trabaja* implies that their economic standing is not high, the workers' sense of self as entrepreneurs contributes to their social status. That status rests at once on their empowerment as women whose work in the field of carpentry shows their capability to transgress certain gender boundaries. But it also stems from the socioeconomic progress the women fathom to achieve in the future –in that sense, the cooperative cultivates social mobility, whether by encouraging some to eventually run their own business, save for studies, or have their children become 'professionals' through higher education. Thus, the cooperative allows for an examination of the intersections between gender, class and status, how they diverge and coalesce, and how entrepreneurialism as both practice and identity mediates between those intersections. I also analyze how the women create conceptions of themselves as

entrepreneurs whose approaches to ‘entrepreneurialism’ at times transgress the cooperative’s institutional boundaries. Since the program, *Argentina Trabaja*, does not allow cooperative members to take other jobs, many of them must find additional sources of income in the informal sector. In this context, I discuss the relationship between being an informal worker, e.g. a domestic employee, and a ‘cooperative entrepreneur.’ Self-identifying as an entrepreneur becomes a way to challenge the social imaginaries that associate criollo women with domestic employment and socioeconomic stagnation.

Once I got to know the workers better, I started to visit there almost every week. At first, I observed their work and participated in whatever small tasks they thought I was capable of doing. Gradually, I started to interview the women and inquire in more detail about their lives outside the confines of the cooperative. The president of the cooperative was a crucial connector between her colleagues and myself and facilitated my encounters with the women also outside the workshop. While my principal methods comprised interviewing and participant-observation, I also engaged in a photographic project to produce a catalogue of the cooperative’s products. I had studied photography and worked in the field prior to my doctorate. But I had not employed visual methods in my doctoral research. The camera served as a wonderful tool to approach the women and chat more about their work and lives beyond the work, while also engaging them in the making of something that they, too, would find useful.

### **Chapter 5: “Cultural capital, status, and legitimacy: mixed-race *Santiagoños* in higher education”**

The last chapter examines how university education empowers criollo students through providing them access to cultural capital. It analyzes the acquisition and meaning of cultural capital through political activism, the exploration of one’s ‘criollo-ness,’ and through



entrepreneurship. The three case studies in the chapter also portray the kinds of avenues through which students can acquire cultural capital with the hopes of improving their social status. To study higher education through the lens of cultural capital is a topic that many social scientists have explored. One of the most contested issues in the heart of many of these studies is Bourdieu and Passeron's (1990) theory of 'reproduction.' The social reproduction paradigm posits that cultural capital is a privilege of middle- and upper middle-class families, in which that capital manifests as distinctive cultural practices and participation; knowledge, and above all, the linguistic ability to articulate the cultural knowledge. Cultural capital then turns into a kind of family inheritance that ensures the subsequent generations are able to maintain their privileged class position. The chapter discusses this theoretical approach and acknowledges its applicability in the field of educational research. Yet I also aim to show that the cycles of intergenerational cultural reproduction are challengeable. Further, the chapter does not argue that criollos' access to higher education has become widespread, let alone a given. What it does argue is that the educational framework provides specific pathways for criollos to build status and harness that status so as to challenge Santiago's socioeconomic polarization.

From October 2016 to December 2017, I was registered as a visiting researcher in the Social Sciences and Health department's *Laboratorio de antropología y lingüística* (anthropology and linguistics laboratory). This afforded me a privileged access to UNSE both as a visiting researcher *and* a researcher-ethnographer. I was able to network among students and university personnel with ease. I made contacts and found informants with whom I ended up spending time both in and outside the university. Most of the times, I met my informants in the university and have a coffee at the department's cafeteria. It was there that I conducted most of the semi-structured, recorded interviews. I also interviewed my informants in cafés in the center

and, on three occasions, in the student's home. Occasionally, I entered as an "observing professor," as I was called, in the classes my informants were taking. I participated in three different academic conferences and workshops at UNSE during my fieldwork. Some of my informants participated in those workshops too, which lead to more and new topics of conversation with them. The chapter describes the intellectual community I found at UNSE and the colleagues that I became the closest with. I also explain how as an ethnographer, I learned to understand how the university life and the access to cultural capital structured my informants' perceptions of themselves and their relationship with the surrounding society

## **Methods**

I conducted life-history interviews with 45 people across my field sites. While their ages varied between 22 and 68, the predominant age bracket was 25-45. The age range also varied between the field sites: at Ironsport, the *becados* were younger than 27, the others in the triathlon club, generally between 35 and 45; at UNSE, my student informants were younger than 26 while the workers (administrators and professors) whom I interviewed were older than 35. At the cooperative, the members' ages ranged between 30 and 55. Beyond these field sites, my interviewees were roughly between 30 and 40 years old. I interviewed most of my informants individually. Sometimes the interviewee's family or friends were present, in which case they often participated in the conversation or sometimes even answered on the informant's behalf. I audio-recorded 22 life histories and took notes on the rest. I often shared the audio recording with the interviewee. Most participants had never narrated their life story to anybody and were thus eager to keep the recording as a souvenir. Usually the interview sessions were pre-arranged and took place either in a cafeteria or the interviewee's home. The initial life history interviews

were followed by later semi-structured or unstructured interviews which often involved going out for a coffee or a drink, taking a break at the university, or going for a run.

In addition to the 45 life history interviews, I conducted 50 pre-arranged semi-structured interviews. The pre-arranged semi-structured interviews could happen over a cup of coffee or on a bicycle ride, but prior to the meeting, I had made it clear that I wanted to interview the person and discuss given topics with her. I divided my informants in each site between ‘key’ informants, ‘everyday informants’ and peripheral informants. ‘Everyday informants’ were those whom I regularly interacted with at each field site yet was not very close with or simply was not able to talk to as much as with others. Peripheral informants were people I contacted through my key informants or randomly met in some related context (e.g. a course for young entrepreneurs or an artisanal expo) and agreed to meet with the explicit intention to discuss topics relevant to my research. I had the opportunity to meet people who worked in business and politics, and whose knowledge of and opinions on Santiago’s socioeconomic situation were naturally informed by their work environments and party politics. Whenever possible, I also talked with domestic employees at my friends’ or informants’ homes.<sup>15</sup> In these conversations, I first casually asked questions about the person’s family and home, and then tried to gear the chat towards matters such as the political situation, the cost of living, sports, etc. I also brought up the question of race by explaining that I was studying socioeconomic mobility among criollos or *gente de raza/sangre mixta* (mixed-race/blood people), and that I was curious to hear what people had to say about it. The conversations contained a wealth of data on different socioeconomic strata’s perceptions of class and race, understandings of Santiago, and what the *idea* of Argentina meant from a Santiagueño’s perspective.

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<sup>15</sup> It is very common in Santiago, even among families of low income, to have a *chica/señora* help them with the domestic chores

I describe in the chapters how I conducted participant-observation in each ethnographic site. In certain ways, my field sites made the *participation* part of participant-observation relatively easy. They were social and institutional spaces with a specific set of functions that were easy to decipher and participate in. For instance, people in a triathlon club ‘did triathlon’ (*hacen triatlón*). Thus, in order to study that group, I ‘did triathlon’ as well. Or, the women in the cooperative made wooden artisanal household items and so I helped the women with their task, whether by painting or gluing, or participated in the workspace by photographing their work. It was also possible *not* to participate in these sites and instead wear only the observer’s hat. I would sit at a corner in the cooperative workshop and pretend to write something in my notebook when really, I was only listening to what the workers were talking about and how they talked about it. Or, I would take a seat in the entrance hall to UNSE’s Health and Social Sciences Department where students sit and chat or study in groups, the different political party factions have their trench war, and where I could observe the students while pretending to be invisible. That said, I also wondered about both the meaning and implications of anthropology’s favorite qualitative method. When –if ever– is participation too much participation? When does participation begin to filter our observations so much that the observations themselves begin to fictionalize? And what about active vs. passive participation and the consequences that especially the latter can have on how we gather data and draw conclusions? How much do the friendships and social ties we forge through ‘participation’ corrupt and/or enhance our ‘observation’?

Six months into my fieldwork, I designed a questionnaire with some of the most common racial and class terms/designations that people use in Santiago. I wanted the respondent to provide her definition for the terms, whether it was a definition she knew or simply invented. Of

the total 70 questionnaires I distributed, I was able to analyze 58. The data from the 58 questionnaires I received revealed a landscape of heterogeneity where one person's definition of a term could be opposite to another's. Following pile-sorting principles, I compiled the answers first based on three key categories: negative/positive/neutral. Within these categories, I identified commonalities and grouped them accordingly (e.g. *negro*: negative: poor, welfare, lazy; *negro*: neutral: black, color, Africa, etc.), thus being able to decipher patterns and repetitive associations, despite their general diversity. But that very diversity in itself was also data. Moreover, it proved even richer when I juxtaposed the diverse questionnaire answers with my informants' narratives and how in everyday speech they deployed terms such as *negro*, *clase media*, *criollo*, etc. Almost half of the questionnaires were filled by individuals whom I knew. In these cases, I was able to contrast their questionnaire answers with how they *actually* used the terms in practice, as I already had likely spent time and conversed with them. It was not uncommon that a person who would define the word *negro* as a 'black person of African descent,' would then use the same word in a conversation referring to a garbage picker or a street cleaner, or simply a poor-looking person hanging about in a park.

### **Beyond the methods**

My ethnographic research was multi-sited in the sense that it took place in very different social and physical spaces which at first sight had hardly anything to do with each other. Those sites were radically different in terms of the world of practices and the physical setting they contained and were marked by. Yet despite their differences, they were all representative of how criollos –and in the cooperative, specifically criollo women– worked their way towards social mobility, accumulated different forms of capital, and embodied today's understandings of entrepreneurialism. "The essence of multi-sited research," writes Mark-Anthony Falzon, "is to

follow people, connections, associations, and relationships across space (because they are substantially continuous but spatially non-contiguous)” (2016: 2). My ethnographic sites were, indeed, substantially continuous. Yet shuttling between them was also difficult at times. Finding a balance between keeping in mind their differences while trying to concentrate on and explore their similarities was a perfect recipe for (ethnographic) confusion. But thinking about Upianita, Ironsport, the cooperative and UNSE as sites for distinct capital production provided them with the “substantial continuity.” It made it possible for me to imagine them as islands on a maritime map and envision the question of capitals as a navigational tool. In that sense, an ethnographer is much like a navigator who instrumentalizes different (theoretical) concepts to orienteer in the world of practice with the aim to arrive in analytical conclusions. That orienteering between my different sites became also easier as I started to grow closer with some of my key informants and discuss with them the research I was conducting at other sites. Those conversations gave me perspective I otherwise might not have discovered, and also made the connections between the different ethnographic spaces clearer.

That I knew Santiago well and had known the place for the better part of my life was an asset in my research. Spanish is not my native language. But it is the first foreign language I learnt to speak fluently, and I learnt it in Santiago at the age of 16. Therefore, I did not have problems with understanding the subtle nuances of meaning and intent that languages can easily distort and that can get quickly lost in translation. Besides the language question, my knowledge of Santiago and, especially, of certain Santiagueños was enormously helpful in my conversations with people. Santiagueños have the fame of always being hospitable and welcoming to foreigners and I cannot think of a situation where it would not be easy as a foreigner to strike up a conversation with a bus driver or a doctor. But what made this even easier was that not only

was I a foreigner, but a foreigner who had a decent understanding of the way the world works and has worked in Santiago.

On the other hand, my familiarity with the place was at times also a burden. The family that hosted me during my exchange year, and with whom I have stayed very close ever since, has become relatively affluent over the past decade. My ‘fake siblings,’ as we call each other, are successful in their bar/restaurant business and so the entire family has benefitted.<sup>16</sup> Consequentially, their surname and the bars they own are known widely across Santiago, and today my brothers form part of the city’s small and insular upper middle-class (and elitist) circles –which are also the client circles that my brothers’ bars cater to. Because of my connection with them, many people also knew *of* me. This implied being the subject of all kinds of unfounded though quite fascinating rumors that I learnt about at Ironsport or the UNSE, where people whom I knew also knew my host family. For example, some people apparently *knew* I was my second eldest fake brother’s mistress. Others *knew* that I was romantically involved with my fake cousin since I often had coffee in his small neighborhood bar. While the sources and content of these rumors baffled me, the fact that they existed did not. Rumors run rife in Santiago and seem to truly condense in its small, interconnected upper middle-class circles. That said, I sometimes worried that my connections with Santiago’s upper middle-class world would affect my relationships with my informants, who obviously had their own ideas of what Santiago’s elites were like. Luckily this never seemed to be the case, or at least I never registered it as such. I did

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<sup>16</sup> When I lived with them in 2000, the family’s economic standing was stable but not great. My host parents owned two small bakeries and fought over finances all the time. I sometimes even wondered why they ever decided to accept an exchange student in their home since it meant yet another mouth to feed. A year ago, I told my host mother about this and, indeed, asked why. She said it was because the person who directed the exchange program’s Santiago’s office, señora Blanca, was a client in her bakery. Moreover, it was because one day Sra. Blanca came to her bakery pleading her to host a student from a country called Finland whom she had not been able to find a family for –the student would arrive in two weeks. My host mother told me she said yes to Sra. Blanca because she is a good Christian. Then she also kindly added that she did not regret it.

not interview anybody in my host family or ask them to fill my questionnaires, although naturally my everyday interactions with them often connected with and informed my ideas concerning my research. I also did not advertise to my informants that I was “the Camachos’ fake sister.” Neither did I try to hide it, let alone negate it if somebody asked. Straddling between the very different kinds of worlds that I inhabit in Santiago was a balancing act, and not always a successful one. But the socioeconomic borders that I crossed everyday as I would first train with the triathlon team and then walk to the cooperative, and then have lunch with my brother at his fancy restaurant and so on are also the borders that my research explores and analyzes. The following pages describe the story(ies) of that exploration.



## Chapter 1: Legitimacy contested: criollo entrepreneurs and the white middle-class

“Here they are, from 2007 to 2014 or 2015,” Dr. Drube tells me as he opens a large, derelict closet in one of the classrooms at Universidad Nacional de Santiago del Estero (UNSE). Inside the closet there are black garbage bags full of paper, stacked on top of one another. There must be at least ten such sacks. “You can take them all, maybe you’ll find something interesting in them.” I am quite sure I will find something interesting in them. The bags contain the final projects of Dr. Drube’s students from a course called Anthropology of Santiago del Estero that he taught for eight years in the sociology program. The final projects concern the students’ own genealogies and geographical and cultural roots that they had been tasked with tracing and writing about. I open one of the bags and discover that the projects are hand-written compilations of text, images, and maps. Some of them are put together beautifully and with much attention to detail; others look like they were made by an 8-year old who barely knows how to write. I close the bag and start making strategies about to how to take all of them with me and then transport them to my 8<sup>th</sup> floor apartment in a building with a broken elevator.

A few days later, I start going through the students’ works. There are 70 of them (two of the sacks I leave in the closet for the works concerned different topics, not of interest to me). Each section, whether just one or a few pages long, is a response to a specific question, such as “discuss your family origins” and “describe a meaningful anecdote you know about your ancestors.” On the first page, the student is asked to define herself between the following options: 1) descendant of European immigrants; 2) descendant of *other* (e.g. Syrio-Lebanese, Russian,<sup>17</sup> South-American) immigrants (emphasis mine); 3) mixture of immigrants and

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<sup>17</sup> In Argentina, immigrants from Eastern Europe in general were (and are) often grouped simply under the term *rusos* – Russians. Most Russian immigrants came from the eastern parts of the country, many of whom were Jews,

autochthonous Argentines/Santiagoños (*santiagoños autóctonos*); 4) autochthonous Argentines/Santiagoños. There is no option for indigenous or *indio*, although the term autochthonous could be understood as such. Neither do the options include Afro-Argentines.<sup>18</sup> The roughly corresponding native categories –those that people use in the vernacular– would be: 1) *gringos*; 2) *turcos*, *judíos* (Jews), *rusos* and “others;” 3) *mezclas/mestizos/criollos*; 4) *indios*. I am surprised by the essentializing manner in how the students are expected to explain their ethno-racial identification. At the same time, the categorizations admittedly mirror the widely shared national imaginaries of what and who Argentines are, and also echoes the cultural hierarchies those imaginaries carry within. Still, it quickly becomes apparent that the rigid taxonomies in the projects hardly withstand the trial of everyday life.

The works reveal that even just defining oneself ethno-racially in relation to one’s geographical and cultural origins is a mission saturated with contradictions. Almost invariably those who claim to have their roots in Europe (or, as the local saying goes, to have “European blood”<sup>19</sup>) write extensively about their genealogies, which they are evidently well versed with. They describe their ancestors’ voyage across the Atlantic, from where (but not why) they had left, and how they had ended up in Santiago. Some even have pictures of their ancestral villages,

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fleeing the late 19<sup>th</sup> century pogroms. But waves of immigrants from Poland, Ukraine, or the Belarus also arrived in Argentina, especially in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The immigrant groups (across nationalities) had their struggles to maintain or change their cultural identities. In the processes of cultural homogenization, the specific categories collapsed, resulting in essentializing categories such as *rusos* (James & Lobato 2004).

<sup>18</sup> Historically, Afro-Argentines descend from the tens of thousands of slaves that arrived in the country between the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. Most of the slaves were taken to the northern regions, Santiago among them. According to the national census of 1778, “negros” –people of African origins– constituted 54% of Santiago’s population. Subsequently, their presence in the local ethno-racial makeup has faded. The reasons for this are subjects of scholarly debates and range from consequences of miscegenation and emigration (especially to Brazil) to high mortality rates through diseases and military conflicts where Afro-Argentines would often fight on the forefront (Contarino Sparta 2011; Perri 2006).

<sup>19</sup> It is common in Argentina –certainly in Santiago– to refer to one’s geographical origins, ethnicity, or race with the word ‘blood’ – *sangre*. Thus, for instance *sangre europea* (European blood), *sangre india* (indigenous blood), or *sangre judia* (Jewish blood) are commonplace colloquialisms. That vocabulary reifies one’s background, ethnicity or race as a biological condition, making it therefore socially indisputable.

whether in Italy, Spain or France. Those who deem themselves *mezclas* or *criollos*, *also* highlight the immigrant side of their family, especially so if those immigrants were Europeans. It seems that even if one has seven great-grandparents who are from Santiago or nearby, and only one who is Spanish, it is the story of the Spaniard that one wants to tell. The other seven would hardly get more than a few lines dedicated to discussing their roots and ethnic or racial origins.

But there are also exceptions. Some announce their grandparents were indigenous from such and such *departamento*<sup>20</sup> and spoke Quichua.<sup>21</sup> These students also write about the culture of folklore in their family anecdotes: “I remember that my grandfather liked to play the guitar in the evenings, especially *zambas salteñas*” (folkloric music from the province of Salta, to the north of Santiago); “In my family, we share criollo culture” (no further explanations given). Out of the 70 students, 45 consider themselves *criollos*. Their discussions of their ancestry beckon as much towards the old continent as towards the interior of Santiago’s province. Their family anecdotes range from Sicilian sausage-making to *chacarera* dancing (folklore music from Santiago) and using Quichua as a secret family language no further than two generations ago. The stories are entertaining, but at first glance I wonder, with a degree of disappointment, whether they are helpful at all. How could these stories inform my quest to understand what *criollo* identity means? Then I begin to see that the heterogenous explanations and different family biographies are, in fact, a wonderful source of data. The relationship between a somewhat forceful self-identification in the beginning of the text, and subsequent descriptions of one’s

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<sup>20</sup> In Argentina, provinces are further divided into *departamentos*, which corresponds to the division of state counties in the United States.

<sup>21</sup> Prior to the colonization, there were various different indigenous languages spoken in Northern Argentina. How and why these languages gradually disappeared has been a subject of much scholarly debate (cf. Acuña & Adriani 2014; Albarracin & Alderetes 2005; Grosso 2008; Ferras, 2010). Today, Quichua –written with an “i” rather than an “e” to mark its subtle differences from the Quechua spoken in Peru– remains as virtually the only indigenous language still spoken in Argentina. The majority of those who speak it reside in Santiago. It is estimated that of the roughly 900,000 inhabitants in Santiago’s province, some 100,000 use Quichua as their first or second language.

family and origins highlight the elusiveness of *being a criollo*. Further, this elusiveness also correlates with the scholarly discussions of what an *Argentine criollo* actually means –a topic I will elaborate on later in this chapter. Finally, these texts indirectly point to the intertwined relationship between class and race/ethnicity. Those who extensively discuss their European origins do not fail to mention their families’ intergenerational professional trajectories: from farmers to doctors and lawyers. There are only few such mentions among those who make no claims to their European-ness. (That said, those whose roots are partly in the Middle East bring up the commercial activities their families have historically engaged in, thereby reaffirming the popular myth that “all *turcos* are business owners.”)

### **Chapter structure**

The initial intention of this dissertation was to investigate the dynamic and changing cultural understandings of race, class, and status. The scope of that intention was as wide as it was vague. Yet I was also aware that being in the field would clarify and refine the questions my dissertation now examines. What emerged as a central concern was how mixed-race Santiagueños accessed and accrued social, economic, and cultural capital, thereby being able to experience socioeconomic mobility (Bourdieu 1986, 2010). In this dissertation, I show how the accrual of these forms of capital is linked with one’s self-identification and social status as an entrepreneur or as being entrepreneurial. Further, I argue that while entrepreneurialism legitimizes criollos’ role as socially mobile citizens, it also allows them to challenge the rigid class-race relations that historically (and still today) mark widely shared understandings of Argentine-ness. The ethnographic chapters in this dissertation tackle the questions that frame my research – How do the transforming racial and class identities among Santiago’s criollos

challenge traditional Argentine imaginaries of ‘whiteness’ and socioeconomic mobility? What kinds of pathways do Santiago’s criollos take to access socioeconomic mobility and how do these pathways respond to and contest historical hierarchies of class and race? This chapter, in turn, reveals the foundations of those questions and why they matter to begin with. I unravel and situate them in a national and historical battlefield of contesting understandings and (mis)representations of race and class. In doing so, I analyze the incessant processes of racial and class identity construction that underpin the experience of socioeconomic mobility.

In the following pages, I first introduce my main research problem. I discuss its origins and how my approach to it evolved during my fieldwork. The subsequent sections present the core theoretical areas this research is built on, and which I will discuss in greater detail in the next chapter. The second section of this chapter introduces the question of criollo-ness – who the people that my research focuses on are, and what kinds of histories frame today’s conceptions of criollos. While I describe the processes that have led criollos to become the Argentine racial(ized) *other*, I also show how some criollos have capitalized and continue to capitalize on their otherness. I illustrate this with an ethnographic description and analysis of Upianita, a tourist fair outside Santiago, that celebrates (and markets) Santiago’s criollo culture and folklore traditions. Having unpacked the historical moorings and current meanings of criollo-ness, in the third section I move to discuss ‘whiteness’ and its role and relevance in social imaginaries of what it means to be Argentine. An inseparable part of these imaginaries is the idea of the middle class, and the historical construction of modern Argentina as a European, middle-class country. I show how the country’s imagined racial spectrum grew increasingly monochromatic, eventually leaving all else out but a few different hues of white. The ‘whitening’ of the nation also serves as a base chord for the myth that “all Argentines came from the ships.” The fourth section probes

into the making of this myth through examining how middle-classness (in Buenos Aires) is understood as a logical consequence of one's immigrant origins. In Santiago, however, the realities of people's origins describe a very different narrative. As the opening of this chapter shows, criollos can hardly relate to the 'origin stories' that form an integral part of the modern Argentine mythology. Through ethnographic examples, I show what kinds of alternative origin stories emerge in the hinterlands, and how they play into the construction of criollo identities. Finally, I turn to entrepreneurialism. I show how it works like a prism that refracts racial identities, perceptions of social mobility and ideologies middle-classness and may thus challenge the social structures built around class and race. As this dissertation on the whole argues, entrepreneurialism can be analyzed as a determinant of one's identity and as such an asset in the arenas of socioeconomic mobility.

### **The origins of the project**

Argentina's political and economic climate during my fieldwork (August 2016 – December 2017) was volatile but not yet catastrophic.<sup>22</sup> The then relatively new government, elected in November 2015, focused its political and economic agenda on encouraging entrepreneurship and boosting the economy from within the private sector. Yet the roots of the growing entrepreneurship extended further back in time. Santiago's economic boom (2005-2015) had improved its inhabitants' financial means: consumption grew as credit cards and cheap credit became accessible to virtually anybody and all kinds of public aid programs ensured steady

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<sup>22</sup> Soon after I left the field, in January 2018, the economic downturn started to become increasingly visible. The peso was losing its value and the inflation growing at a terrifying speed. A record-high IMF loan of 57 billion USD in September 2018 was intended to reassure foreign investors that the country was not on the verge of an economic collapse – an assurance that turned out to be an empty promise. However, while the economic and political climate presaged future difficulties during my field work during 2016-2017, the situation still harbored hopes for stability.

sources of money –though many of them were highly criticized and rather unsuccessful. On the other hand, the economic growth also made it easier (albeit not easy) for people to move from being simply consumers to also becoming producers, i.e. set their own businesses, whether legal or not. The public atmosphere encouraged “all Argentines to be entrepreneurs” and to “fulfill one’s dreams by daring to *emprender*.” (The verb that translates in English as best ‘to be enterprising’ or ‘entrepreneurial.’ The texts are from a publicity campaign by the municipal government of Buenos Aires.) The ideologies of entrepreneurialism thus permeated even through those sectors of the society whose marginal position had historically impeded them from being much else than simply ‘poor;’ that is, especially the criollos in the country’s hinterlands. It was in this context that my research topic turned towards examining socioeconomic mobility among the country’s mixed-race population through the lens of entrepreneurialism.

When I arrived in Santiago for the first time as an exchange student in 2000, I was struck by the racial features of the majority of the population. Coming from a small town in the eastern part of Finland, racial diversity was not something I had been acquainted with beyond a few American and British TV shows. Thus, in the beginning, Santiago’s racial makeup naturally caught my attention: people were much darker than I had imagined. These imaginings were not entirely unfounded. I had studied Latin American history as part of my secondary school’s history curriculum. And while I had learned that in Latin America many people were mestizos, I had also learned that Argentina, Uruguay and Chile had been mostly populated by European immigrants –at least that is what I remember the history books telling me. The reality I encountered in Santiago, however, suggested something quite different and felt largely confusing. But since everything else felt confusing as well, in the end I simply assumed the reality as it seemed and did not think about ethno-racial differences much further. In all its

simplicity, I learnt that *negros* were to be avoided; *criollos* were locals who did not really mingle with the white people –those whom were also called *gringos*– and that the white people were European and hence the best. Since I was white and came from Europe, my place in Santiago was among those Argentines who idealized the Old Continent and were convinced that thanks to their European ancestors, Argentina existed. At that point, I had little understanding of class differences, especially given how egalitarian I thought that my own country was. Still, it was rather clear that poor people were dark people and white people, if not rich, were better off than the rest.

Today I deem my initial and ingenuous (mis)learning process in Santiago as an important element of the concerns that drive my research. Only many years afterwards did I realized how the racial undertones marking the local social structure in fact screamed of racial hierarchies woven into a particular class system. The generally shared idea is that in that class system, almost everybody is middle class. Moreover, and as exemplified by what I had learnt about Argentina in the history books, the hegemonic assumption is that Argentines are also European descendants and hence white. In Santiago, the majority of the population was and still is neither. However, already ten years after I had first lived there, the socioeconomic structures in Santiago had undergone considerable changes. Following the devastating cash crisis in 2001-2002 that shattered the national economy, Santiago (along with the rest of the country) entered into a rapid economic upturn. The infrastructural improvements, the city's tidiness, and the cranes that gave the flat town a promise of urban verticality were all characteristics that a decade earlier had been simply unimaginable. In short, the city had seemingly become less poor and its people as well. When in 2014 I did my pilot research there, I began to see that socioeconomic mobility –one of the fundamental popular tenets of Argentine-ness– had shifted from being a dream to a lived



experience. Moreover, it had become an experience that was not an exclusive right of the gringos but also accessible to vast sectors of the criollos. What I wanted to understand is how the socioeconomic mobility was actually *experienced* by those who were not white, and previously permanent residents in the society's margins. Moreover, I wanted to discover the ways in which this socioeconomic mobility allowed criollos to challenge the historical parameters of class and race. Did it affect their own racial identities and if so, how?

My initial ethnographic research took place in Upianita, a touristic fair outside Santiago showcasing Santiago's folkloric criollo culture. The fair also introduced me to the idea of entrepreneurialism as a key to understanding current processes of socioeconomic stratification in Santiago. I will give a more detailed description of my work in Upianita further on in this chapter. Here it suffices to say that the site did not only show how criollo vendors in the fair considered themselves entrepreneurs. It also exposed the links between being entrepreneurial and being a criollo, and how this positioned the vendors vis-à-vis the generally white tourists from other parts of the country and abroad. It was evident that my informants embraced entrepreneurialism as an avenue toward improving socioeconomic status. Later during my fieldwork, I observed similar processes also at my other field sites –women's artisanal cooperative and the local triathlon club. Being an entrepreneur or entrepreneurial, seemed to have become a societal category in its own right and as members of that category, mixed-race Santiagueños could access and generate social, cultural, and economic capital. This afforded (and affords) them a social status that allows them to take a slight step outside the traditional, vertical orchestration of race and class. In other words, while the hegemonic understandings of Argentina's middle-classness –being white and having European roots, having experienced inter-generational upward mobility, being an educated professional– would not allow criollos to

become socially mobile, being an entrepreneur/entrepreneurial does. Against this backdrop, this dissertation suggests that being an entrepreneur/entrepreneurial implies access to legitimacy as a citizen and a viable path toward being seen as middle-class by those who still consider middle-classness and whiteness to be synonymous. The following section begins to unpack the histories of Argentina's class and racial hierarchies by focusing on who are the criollos, *negros* and *gringos* that constitute one axis in the matrix of racial and class differences.

### **Criollo and the *Argentine* criollo**

A brief glance at different online English dictionaries as well as the dictionary of the *Real Academia Española* (the principal Spanish dictionary used in the Hispanic world) reveals their unanimous definition for the word “criollo:” a person, who is born in Latin America (especially in Hispanic America) and who is of European (especially Spanish) descent (e.g. Collins Online Dictionary 2019; Merriam-Webster 2019; Real Academia Española 2019; The Free Dictionary 2019).<sup>23</sup> The definition has its historical and imperialist moorings in the colonial era, when *criollo* was used as a designation for those who had been born in the colonized South America but whose parents (or grandparents) had been born in the Old Continent. It was also one of the principal elements of the colonial cast system, which at first was divided into three simple ethno-racial categories. *Criollos*, *indios*, and *negros* indicated both race and social status at once. *Criollos* –white people– occupied indisputably the society's highest echelons; *indios* –indigenous peoples– were their uncivilized subordinates, and *negros* –black people– were simply slaves and therefore hardly humans at all. Decades and then centuries of *mestizaje* –miscegenation–

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<sup>23</sup> The principal Spanish dictionary also offers regional variations for the definition of *criollo/criolla* (the feminine adjective), which encompass its current meaning in Argentina – “local,” “mixed-race,” originating from the colonized regions. I discuss these meanings below.

necessitated an ongoing revision of the initial cast hierarchies. Criollos and *indios* gave birth to *mestizos*; criollos and *negros* gave birth to *mulatos*; criollos and *mestizos* gave birth to *castizos*, and so on. But the continuous processes of *mestizaje* also proved detrimental to the official cast classifications. As the categories became less and less pure, it became increasingly hard to keep track of them. Thus, they began to collapse under a handful of ethno-racial labels that have persisted until today. Among those principal labels, the ones that have best survived the test of time are the ones that the system started with: *criollos*, *indios*, and *negros* (Grosso 2008). It is then hardly surprising that in many Latin American countries, the term *criollo* is still used in reference to the “hegemonic society descending from the *conquistadores*” (Coronel-Molina & Grabner-Coronel 2005:300). In countries with a strong indigenous presence, e.g. Peru or Bolivia, ‘criollo-ness’ has become a social construction based on what it is *not*: *not* indigenous; *not* mestizo (mixed-race) (ibid.). Like a vestige of the colonial era, *criollo-ness* still marks the territories of socioeconomic and political power, epitomizes the concept of old money, and points to traceable family lineages and pedigree.

Today in Argentina, the case is the opposite. Historically, criollos were, indeed, those who had been born in the conquered lands of today’s Argentina, direct descendants of the colonizers. Just as in other viceroyalties<sup>24</sup> in the colonized continent, *criollo* was a principal cast category and always on the top of the socioeconomic food chain. Further, like in other Hispanic American countries where, by the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the caste system had all but disappeared, criollos remained as a social designation denoting a wealth of economic and cultural capital, as well as European (especially Spanish) origins. But this began to change towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and with the onset of the Great Migration, i.e. the period between the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early

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<sup>24</sup> Viceroyalty in the colonized America was a governmental entity ruled by the viceroy, i.e. governor appointed the Spanish crown.

20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Argentina was fast on its way to becoming a ‘modern,’ ‘civilized’ nation with a white face and nostalgia for its roots in Europe. In the process, the realities of ethno-racial mixing were re-written into the history as an insignificant and distant past irrelevant to the ongoing nation-building. As stated in a national census report from 1895, “There is in the whole of the country a very small quantity of mixed-race individuals, the result of the commerce between whites and Indians...who constitute the remains of a race in the process of extinction” (II National Census 1895, in Chamosa 2008). In this context, in which the national histories were shaped to reflect the enormous structural changes in the society, the Argentine criollo began its gradual metamorphosis. First, it was turned into a nationally constructed, in many ways fictional and romanticized figure whose role was to embody “Argentine authenticity” (Guzmán 2013). Adolfo Prieto (1988) suggests that towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the figure of criollo began to fuse with the figure of *gaucho* (an Argentine cowboy of sorts), as if turning into a unifying emblem for a nation in the making; a provider of a sense of cultural anchors and coherence in a landscape of geographical, cultural, and linguistic heterogeneity. In onset of the *criollist discourse* in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, as Prieto calls it, the figure was still racially white. But in its representations of ‘authentic Argentina,’ criollo also became an expression of nostalgia and belonging for those who could not identify with the growing foreign population. Especially for the popular sectors who were moving into the growing urban areas in search for jobs and better life, criollo-ness served as a kind of emotional bridge to their roots in the country’s interior. The interior provinces especially in the north, were considered the cradle of folklore associated with criollo-ness. Thus, in popular literature, theatre and music, criollo-ness became celebrated as a cultural refuge and a way to encounter the foreignness in the cities (ibid.). It was precisely in this process that the Argentine criollo began to change his skin color, gradually growing darker and

turning into something akin to a mixed-race person (Adamovsky 2014). With his roots in the (northern) interior, the criollo finally turned into a representation of the “remains of a race in the process of extinction” (II National Census 1895, in Chamosa 2008) and as such, somebody inferior to the ‘white makers’ of ‘modern Argentina.’

### **Authenticity contested: the case of Upianita**

“I am an authentic *criolla*, and us criollos are authentic Santiagueños,” Doña Elva, 59, says and sternly looks at me in the eye as I directly ask her about racial self-identification. She is busy making *empanadas* (savory pasties) with remarkable dexterity, placing the full trays next to her wherever there is space to wait for their turn in the oven. The oven behind her is a typical north-Argentine clay oven used to make myriad regional foods. I am sitting by their table with her and her family in a tourist fair called Upianita, some 15 miles from Santiago, where Doña Elva keeps her empanada stand. The fair is a fixed open-air site built quite literally in the *monte*.<sup>25</sup> It opens every Saturday for tourists and locals alike, and offers regional foods, artisanal products, folkloric music spectacles, and dancing classes of *bailes criollos* (criollo dances). Open since 2009, it has grown into a fixture in Santiago’s tourist brochures and along with a similar site closer to Santiago’s center, a celebration of Santiago’s folklore culture *par excellence*.

Between September 2016 and January 2017, I visited Upianita almost every week and learnt to know the vendors there. I was interested in the fair and its participants to understand Santiago’s ambiguous role as Argentina’s economic and geographical periphery, a *criollo* hinterland, and as the cradle of folklore and ‘authentic Argentina.’ Somehow in Upianita (as in

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<sup>25</sup> *Monte* means Santiago’s dry and short-grown forest. Colloquially, the term also stands for the “outback,” or “the bush:” e.g. “vive en el monte” would translate into something like “she lives in the bush.” Moreover, Santiago’s urbanites often consider anything 10km outside the city already to be “monte.”

many other similar sites of ‘ethnic and cultural tourism’), the ‘barbaric’ periphery became the ‘exotic’ hinterland, the uncivilized *Indios* turned into authentic Argentine criollos and folklore replaced all perceived lack of culture. I was keen on understanding how people like Doña Elva, by then a central figure in the fair vendors’ internal organization, experienced their role as promoters of criollo-ness and the economic benefits the fair afforded them. In other words, I wanted to understand how people constructed their racial and class identities in a space that marketed authenticity and commodified ideas of regional culture, while also offering economic opportunities to its workers.



Upianita is managed by the Secretary of Tourism in Santiago’s provincial government and maintained mostly through public funds.<sup>26</sup> It forms part of a larger campaign, initiated in 2009, to convert part of the historical *Camino Real* into a national tourist destination of cultural heritage. *El Camino Real* is a route that during the colonial period connected the Alto Peru in the

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<sup>26</sup> Nobody could tell me where the *other* funds came from.

North-west with Rio de la Plata on Argentina's east coast and ran directly through Santiago – then an important crossing of Argentina's two main commercial routes. The project in 2009 involved rehabilitating some of the small villages along the *camino*, restoring colonial chapels, and efforts to market the regional foods, music, and artisanal production as an integral part of Santiago's cultural heritage. Upianita was and still is the project's poster child. Its vendors must be residents of the nearby villages and register in the fair to sell criollo products (*productos criollos*). The fair's vendors are phenotypically dark-skinned, very much fitting the description of what is today seen as an Argentine criollo.

Nowhere else in Santiago did I ever hear the word *authentic* being used as much as in Upianita. The artisanal products were 'authentic,' the roasted pig was 'authentic,' and the people, too, were 'authentic.' But authentic of what? "We want Upianita to show the authentic Santiagueña culture, the criolla culture; that's what we want Argentines from other regions to see." This was the response I got from the government representative who oversaw the fair's workings every week. Later in that same conversation she told me that all her family was of Spanish origins. Occasionally, I chatted with the visitors. Besides Santiagueños from the city who had come with their families to enjoy a leisurely afternoon and eat empanadas and other foods, the visitors were from all over the national territory and beyond. Many were from large cities, such as Buenos Aires, Rosario, or Santa Fe. They had arrived by bus on organized tours and made a stop in Santiago on their way further to the north-west, known for its ('authentic') Andean culture and magnificent landscapes. "We don't see this side of Argentina in Buenos Aires;" "This is very *interesting!*"; "I think it's fantastic to see what different cultures we have in our country," were some of the comments I collected from the visitors when asking what they thought of Upianita. Upianita seemed to be precisely what it was marketed to be: at once

authentic and exotic, or as one visitor from Rosario wittily put it, “authentically exotic.” It was at that point in Upianita that I first started thinking about it as a space of ongoing transactions and cultural commodification, and the fair participants’ claims for authenticity and harnessing their criollo-ness as a form of entrepreneurialism. The following ethnographic descriptions illustrate how some of the workers’ understandings of what it means to be entrepreneurial underpin their success at the fair.



Doña Judith, 42, has worked at Upianita since 2012. She sells local meats prepared on open fire and every time I go there, I see a long queue of people patiently waiting to get their share of her foods. “It is good to have business here,” she says matter-of-factly, thereby confirming my observations.

Thanks to this, I’ve been able to save money to build a new room in my house, which is not a small thing because the materials can be so expensive, because you need a lot of bricks and cement. But thanks to God, I’ve now finished that project and when my son comes to visit me, he doesn’t have to sleep in the living room!



But you know what is even better? I've started taking classes in the *profesorado*<sup>27</sup> to become a kindergarten teacher. I always dreamt about becoming a *maestra* and now with God's help it is happening.

Like Doña Elva, Judith also calls herself criolla. When I ask her about her occupation, she pauses for a second and thinks. Then, framed by a timid laughter, she says she thinks she is an entrepreneur although later she will be a *maestra*. Judith's eyes beam with pride as she tells me about her plans to graduate from the *profesorado* in a couple of years and then start working in the kindergarten in her village, Sumamao, some 40 miles from Santiago. She tells me that she finished her secondary school when already having children, and then started working in a local school kitchen. She has always wanted her children to have a higher education degree. Today, her eldest son is a policeman in a village a couple of hours from Santiago, her daughter is a nurse, and her youngest daughter, who is on her second last year of high school, wants to become a teacher. Judith says that it has been an enormous sacrifice to have her children study, and everybody in the family has had to work: "you have to be entrepreneurial today to continue fighting." She enthusiastically acknowledges that Upanita has made a huge difference in her family economy.

Carlos, who seems to be in his fifties, works as a maintenance man in the fair and also sells soft drinks, beer, and wine. Yet another person who calls himself criollo, he is openly proud for *not* being an urbanite nor an *indio*,<sup>28</sup> and for still living in the same place he was born in, just a few miles from Upanita. He is equally proud for having his business in Upanita, and for growing animals in his small farm to sell them for some of the vendors in Upanita.

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<sup>27</sup> To become a teacher of any sorts, one must study in a teachers' academy, i.e. *profesorado*. It is not that as a teacher or *maestro* one would necessarily earn more than as a vendor in Upanita –although in Upanita the earnings are highly seasonal. However, to have a higher education degree serves as important status currency which, together with one's entrepreneurial work, potentiates one's social status.

<sup>28</sup> *Indio* is typically associated with coming from and/or living in the rural areas; being uneducated, lazy, backwards etc.

Here we work hard, and to be honest, nobody gets rich but I think it makes a lot of sense to work here, because work here is good and brings extra income. Here we who work are not like those lazy *Indios* who don't do anything, because you have those *Indios* everywhere, and here you work hard and you have your business [*emprendimiento*], and people see that.

Next to Carlos, his friend, who does not want to tell me his name nor seems too keen on talking to me at all, nods in agreement. Almost everybody I talk to agree that “business is mostly good.” Upianita seems to reify the figure of a so-called ‘authentic criollo’ as an ahistorical subject who embodies timeless folklore culture. Just as Adolfo Prieto argues in the late 1980s, the criollo in Upianita is at once a conduit to an unidentified, undefinable past and a representation of Argentine-ness confined to a specific and bounded cultural context. But of course, the vendors themselves are not ahistorical subjects and beyond their Saturday business activities, their ‘authentic’ criollo-ness reveals a wholly different landscape of criollo-ness.

“I confess to you, I really hate *chacarera!*”, Doña Elva’s daughter-in-law, María, tells me and laughs with a warm sense of complicity. In the background, there is a band playing live *chacarera* and some people in front of the stage are doing their best to dance to the tune. At that point I have talked with Doña Elva and her family on a number of occasions, and they have begun to tell me more freely about their everyday lives. “I like *cumbia* and *cuarteto*,<sup>29</sup> that’s what we listen to at home. Before we had the children, Alfredo (María’s husband) and I used to go out a lot, to night clubs. That’s the music you have here in the night clubs. *Chacarera* is for tourists.” When in a different conversation I ask María and her sister-in-law, Sulema, what they think the vendors from Upianita invest their money in, the response is clear: cell phones, TVs, home improvement, vehicles, bus tickets to go to Buenos Aires to see relatives who work there

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<sup>29</sup> Both are music genres popular not only in Argentina but also elsewhere in Latin America. In Argentina, both genres are often associated with the lower socioeconomic classes, although their popularity is by no means limited to them.

or for the relatives to come to Santiago. “I’m paying that van and I’m telling you, nobody in my village has a van like that,” Doña Elva intercepts, having overheard our conversation. “And that van helps me work more and run this business. If not, bringing all this material (food material) here would be so hard, like it used to be before I started paying for the van. And I’d still have to take the bus to get my medicine in Santiago!”

The scholarly field of cultural heritage tourism is wide and contested. Some researchers are critical about the consequences that cultural heritage and ‘ethnic tourism’ has for the local communities. The commodification of culture in itself, and the perpetuation of hegemonic power relations between the tourist and the ethnic *other* are seen as but a couple of the negative effects of ‘ethnic tourism’ (Alameida-Santos 2006; Korstanje 2011; Yang 2011). On the other hand, it is also seen as a source of economic empowerment for the communities who participate in it, and an avenue towards socioeconomic ascent (Dos Santos Correa & Oliveira 2006; Fernandez & Ramos 2010). The case of Upianita does not dispute either of these views. Undoubtedly, it is a space where the historical power relations are simply masked by the transactions that sell *authenticity* for X amount of pesos. It also reifies the idea of an ‘authentic’ criollo in a space marked by exoticness, making it easier for the tourists from the country’s centers to approach it. However, as my conversations with the vendors show, it is also a site where their criollo-ness is packaged as a performance and thereby harnessed for their sense of agency. By subscribing to and further creating the imaginaries of criollo culture that Upianita creates and markets, they benefit socially and economically. Upianita may portray them as ‘authentic’ criollos for the purpose of promoting tourism in Santiago. But it also allows them become entrepreneurs, thereby enabling them to gain legitimacy as consuming and producing citizens (cf. Yang & Wall 2008). Thus, the intersection between ‘authentic criollo-ness’ and ‘criollo entrepreneurialism’

becomes a site where the concept of criollo is in a constant tension between being fluid and mutable, on one hand, and being reified, on the other.

As a field site, Upianita was like a laboratory that offered me a direct view onto some of the cornerstones sustaining my fieldwork. It allowed me to observe *in situ* how criollo-ness emerged and was performed at a specific and situated context and what it meant outside it. Upianita showed how the criollo identity found its legitimization in entrepreneurship. This observation turned out to be pivotal for the next 12 months of my research in my other field sites—the Ironsport triathlon team, the Cooperative, and Santiago’s National University. Moreover, Upianita epitomized the ‘messiness’ of Argentina’s ethno-racial and class hierarchies that are engraved into the country’s national histories but today, subtly challenged. The purpose of this section, then, has been to introduce the meaning of criollo-ness as a racial and cultural identity while also alluding to the understandings of class that frame it. In the following section, I will discuss the historical moorings of the class hierarchies that underpin those racial identities. I will show why and how ‘modern’ Argentina became known as a white, middle-class country and the northern criollo its inconvenient albeit exotic *other*.

### **White, prosperous Argentina**

By the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Argentina had grown to be one of the richest countries in the world. The economy surged on agricultural exports, supported by foreign investment and an ongoing influx of immigrant workers. Between 1840 and 1930, over six million immigrants, namely from Europe (especially from Italy and Spain) and the Middle East, disembarked on the shores of Rio de la Plata, mostly in the port of Buenos Aires. While many emigrated due to poverty in their home countries and with hopes of finding economic success, the Argentine state

also actively promoted immigration. In the name of national progress, the country needed more people to populate its enormous territory and a larger labor force to intensify the agricultural production of its countless hectares of farmable land. The state's immigration policy, however, was not one of open doors. While its 1853 constitution explicitly stated that Argentina welcomed immigrants regardless of their origins, it also added that Europeans were especially welcome. Thus, the state rather openly preferred Western- and Southern-Europeans, accepted Eastern-Europeans and Middle-Easterners, and tolerated, albeit with suspicion, others.<sup>30, 31</sup>

These politics of exclusion, designed in the ethos of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century nation-building, were strategically deployed to 'whiten' the face of the nation and turn Argentina into an essentially European country. At that point, ethnocentric cultural evolution theories were widely considered a proof of European superiority in the Western cultural hemisphere. They were much in vogue especially among the leaders in Latin American countries: the mission to civilize the relatively young nation-states across the region was directly tied to prevalent understanding of cultural and racial hierarchies.<sup>32</sup> Thus, European immigration was seen as a natural solution to populate the huge territory of Argentina and rid it from all traces of its 'culturally inferior' Indians. At the same time, Argentina would become a reflection of all things civilized on the other side of the Atlantic. To an extent, the efforts were successful: in 1914, after four decades of

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<sup>30</sup> In the constitution written in 1853 the article 25 states: "*The Government will foment immigration from Europe, and will not restrict or limit with taxes the entry into the country by those foreigners who wish to work its land, improve its industry, and introduce and teach science and arts*" (Constitución de la Federación Argentina, 1853. Translation and emphasis mine.)

<sup>31</sup> See e.g. Raanan Rein (2010) on the ambivalence with which Argentine state received Eastern European Jews in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, and Alberto Tasso (1989) on the arrival of Arab (mostly Syrian and Lebanese) immigrants in Northern Argentina.

<sup>32</sup> Among the most influential late 19<sup>th</sup> century cultural evolution theorists are anthropologists Henry James Morgan and Edward Burnett Tylor. In Argentina, the country's seventh president, Domingo Sarmiento, exemplified the official adoption of cultural evolution theory. In his book *Conflicto y Armonías de las Razas en América* (originally published in 1883) Sarmiento constantly juxtaposes 'the white race' (Europeans) with the 'primitive race' (indigenous people), asserting page after page the superiority of the former.

intense immigration, those born outside Argentina accounted for over 30% of Buenos Aires population of 2,000,000. (The total population in the country at the time was roughly 7,800,000.) A vast majority of them came from Europe, especially from Spain and Italy. *Gringos* –white European settlers– were exemplary socioeconomic climbers whose upward mobility was almost guaranteed (DeRiz 2009; Garguín 2012). It was not only possible but also expected that a farmer’s son (or rarely, daughter) would become a shop owner, the shop owner’s son (or daughter) a doctor, and the doctor’s son or daughter either a doctor, lawyer or an engineer –or perhaps an artist, musician, or writer. The intergenerational economic growth generated robust salaried and professional sectors whose income level allocated them the middle section on the local socioeconomic scale (DeRiz 2009, Germani 1981). By the 1930s, Argentina had a remarkably egalitarian distribution of wealth, comparable to North America and Northern Europe.

In this socioeconomic landscape, success became framed by *decency* and *respectability* (Owensby 1999). In line with the zeitgeist of modernization and shaping Argentina into a *civilized* nation, being *gente decente* (decent people) and *respetable* (respectable) became synonymous with being civilized. Eventually in the national imaginaries, decency and respectability became parameters for and definers of the middle class that prided itself for its origins in the civilized Europe. Thus, the Argentina that was seen as an assimilated immigrant nation had not only become European (and therefore white) and civilized, but also middle-class. Or rather, to be an Argentine came to imply being white and middle-class. The internal harmony of this norm would be destabilized only when the non-white, *uncivilized others* threatened to leave their place in the society’s margins and enter into its civilized core. It was precisely such a

conjuncture that would finally solidify the idea of what being middle-class meant – and also, what it meant to be a criollo from the country's interior.

### **The marginalized racial *other* and the making of the middle-class Argentina**

According to Ezequiel Adamovsky (2009), middle-classness as a form of collective identity rather than simply an economic category began to congeal in the Argentine social consciousness in the mid-1940s. In 1945, Juan Domingo Perón, an army lieutenant and a popular (and populist) politician, boisterously entered the national political arena. Perón was elected as the president in 1946 on a campaign that promoted social justice with an emphasis on workers' rights, and economic independence geared around full employment and industrial growth (Rock 1985). Perón's political promises and charisma reached, if not outright enthralled, vast sectors of the country's working class. His popularity was particularly notable in the country's poor, interior provinces. For the first time, a national political movement not only acknowledged the society's least favored, such as the northern criollos among *campesinos* (peasants) and urban wage laborers. It actually heralded them as the primary pillars sustaining the Argentine society.

The Peronist campaign accelerated the exodus of people from the interior to the primary urban centers and especially to the capital. Migrant laborers from the north had been arriving in the greater Buenos Aires (the capital and its surrounding areas) in growing numbers already since the 1930s. At that point, Argentina was experiencing rapid industrialization and newly built factories desperately needed new work force to run them. By then, immigration from abroad had decreased drastically, generating a void in the urban centers' labor landscape. This does not mean that the decrease in itself would have created the void. Rather, the void was a result of the combination of an elevated necessity for workers and the stark decline of the supply of workers from abroad (James 1988). Amid these enormous structural changes, the industry kept on

growing, and so did labor unions. Peron's most vocal supporters came precisely from those unions, and while the unions were heterogeneous in terms of their ethno-racial and national makeup, migrant laborers from the provinces had an important presence in them (Grimson 2016).<sup>33</sup> In *Resistance and Integration* (1988), Daniel James shows how the tectonic societal shifts were integral in Peron's ascent to power, and how that ascent also revealed some of the stark divisions that marked the country's changing socioeconomic landscape. Those divisions were not only drawn along the lines of economic position and geographical origins but also in terms of ethno-racial differences. These three intertwined factors congealed in understandings of class divisions. In other words, the arrival of laborers from the country's interior helped establish distinct territories of class and color their frontiers with ethnic and racial(ized) differences.

The people, most notably criollos from the north<sup>34</sup> who arrived in the cities became pejoratively known as *cabecita negras* ("little black-heads") for their dark complexion and pitch-black hair. Much to the urbanites' dismay, these *cabecita negras* were arriving in Buenos Aires not to become invisible workers cleaning their homes and constructing urban infrastructure, but visible citizens and participants in the national political life (James 1988). At the same time, the elites in Buenos Aires, the wealthy landowners in the Pampas, and those who deemed themselves *decent* and *respectable* became acutely aware of the unsettling effect this might have on their own social realms. As a project of the elites on the anti-Peronist side, the idea of the middle

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<sup>33</sup> Alejandro Grimson (2016) argues that many historians within Argentina and abroad, have exaggerated the relevance of internal migrants in Peron's successful presidential campaign and presidency. While foreign immigration declined sharply in the 1930s, the immigrants and their children were by no means erased from the country's work force. Grimson in fact suggests that prominent Argentine sociologists, such as Gino Germani, romanticized the idea of the peasant workers' role in Peron's political success. Grimson refers to the National Census Institutes statistics from 1947, which show that in 1947, less than 20% of Greater Buenos Aires's population were migrants from the interior. In contrast, 26% were foreign-born and 50% reported having at least one parent who had been born abroad (INDEC 1974 quoted in Grimson 2016).

<sup>34</sup> The emigration from Santiago was particularly large in relation to the province's population and still today, Santiagueños are known as the primary seasonal and migrant laborer group in Argentina.



class became divested from its structuralist and economic determinants. Instead, it was mobilized as a form of social identity rooted in claims to European ancestry, inter-generational upward mobility, educational level and profession. That social identity became also an emphatic a way to distinguish oneself from the poor, dark-skinned masses that came from the country's hinterlands (Garguín 2012; Grimson 2016; Guano 2003, 2004).

While the Peronist movement gave visibility to the *cabecita negras*, peasants, and laborers, the provincial Argentina beyond the Pampas remained distant and underdeveloped. Unlike the Pampas and Buenos Aires, Santiago was never a coveted destination for immigrants: in contrast to the high rate of foreign-born population in Buenos Aires in the 1914 census, in Santiago it barely reached 5%, and during the subsequent decades, it hardly grew. Moreover, Santiago experienced scant industrial development and throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century (and still today), agriculture and livestock continued to define and maintain the local economy. As the Pampas and the East coast in general witnessed economic growth and social mobility, Santiago's socioeconomic organization continued as quasi-feudal. Political, economic and cultural capital was kept in the hands of few influential families with European origins and the rest, whether literally or symbolically, served and worked for them. Santiago remained as a nondescript region in Argentina's socioeconomic map; a place of criollos, *negros* and *indios*; a small gringo elite (i.e. descendants of European ancestry), and a very narrow middle sector between the two.

This historical fame continues to characterize Santiago today. When I tell some colleagues in Buenos Aires that I conduct research in Santiago, the responses I get vary from surprise to incredulity. Only a few of those who study similar topics in the metropolitan areas have actually visited Santiago – it is a general understanding that there simply are not enough reasons to travel all the way there. In the vernacular in Buenos Aires, mentioning Santiago may

receive a response that says something about the province's folklore. However, the response can also be quite different, such as "so many *negros* there," or "they are really lazy, the Santiagueños, aren't they?" Moreover, those countless Santiagueños who have moved to the Capital to work as maids, nannies, and wage laborers are often deemed *negros* (Geler 2016). So far, I have described Santiago as a place of criollos. But in different contexts, it is also seen and described as a place of *negros*.

"In Argentina, there are no *negros* and hence no racism." I have heard the statement countless times from people representing different socioeconomic strata, from university educated urbanites living in the United States to bankers and bakers in Santiago. At the same time, the term *negro* is deeply embedded in the everyday, racialized vocabulary across the country, and discrimination against those who are considered *negros* is hardly invisible. But what does this evident contradiction mean? *Negro* is an ambiguous concept at best, charged with connotations pointing to class and status. Further, it is a moral category standing diametrically opposite to those who are deemed *decent* and *respectable*. What makes the idea of *negro* so confusing is that while the word refers directly to color and (black) race, in fact it indicates a person who is low-class, uneducated, lazy, and definitely poor; perhaps also violent and delinquent. As if to truly emphasize these characteristics, in its most pejorative form *negro* becomes *negro de mierda* – a "fucking *negro*." Invariably associated with all kinds of socioeconomic evils that plague Argentina (except the politicians, who make up a category of evil of its own), *negro de mierda* as an insult exposes the deepest structures of racial and class discrimination in a country that claims to have neither. As Alejandro Grimson, a renowned Argentine cultural anthropologist, has written, in Argentina one can say there are no *negros* in

the country and a few minutes later explain how half of the society's problems are caused by *negros de mierda* (Grimson 2012. Cf. Briones 2002, Geler 2016; Gordillo 2016).

Yet it would be impossible to deracialize *negro* and divest the word from its phenotypical implications. Because of the term's inherently negative overtones, the presence of the *negro* in the national landscape pierces through ideas of Argentine racial homogeneity and problematizes the hegemonic claims to white, European middle-classness. To solve this problem, in the social imaginaries the place of *negros*, just like that of *criollos*, is in the north, far from its white, civilized centers. Once securely confined to the country's hinterlands, their *otherness* becomes easily explicable as a distant representation of social maladies, on one hand, and a racial anomaly, on the other. The *othering* of *negros* thus operates differently than with *criollos*: while *criollo*, especially in the north, is first and foremost a racial category with certain cultural implications, *negro* is first and foremost a popular class category with racial implications. *Criollo* is usually not an insult. To call somebody a *negro* (without direct reference to race), on the other hand, often comes with degrading connotations that can easily convert into horrible insults. As this dissertation on the whole shows, entrepreneurial, hard-working *criollos* are not necessarily *negros*. But phenotypically, *negros* are usually mixed-race, i.e. *criollos*.

### **Origin narratives: mythical facts and alternative stories**

There is a saying in Argentina that "Argentines came from the ships." Alluding to the arrival of immigrants from overseas, the saying once again shows how the myth of the nation's foreign (European) roots undergirds the meanings of being Argentine. But in Santiago, as the early immigration statistics demonstrate, only a small part of the population "came from the ships." Instead, most Santiagueños, even the today's urbanites, came from the Northern *monte* –

the bushlands outside the urban areas in the region. Sergio Visacovsky's research with middle-class *Porteños* (as people from Buenos Aires are called) examines how the narratives of one's European ancestry become intergenerational class and status currency. The way (middle-class) people explain and even justify their class position is through elaborate narratives that Visacovsky calls "origin stories" (*relatos de origen*) with a conspicuously common narrative template (2014). These stories describe the family lineage from its geographical origins, initial financial difficulties, sacrifice and persistence to the ensuing socioeconomic mobility that has placed the family in the category of middle class. While Visacovsky highlights the emphasis of European origins in these narratives, other scholars also point to the importance of the immigrant families' working-class origins. Daniel James and Mirta Lobato (2004) show in their discussion of Ukrainian immigrants in a working-class neighborhood in Buenos Aires, how the importance of the upward mobility as a *process* may be even more important than the condition of middle-classness as a *product* of that process. Visacovsky's focus on the geographical and cultural dimension of the origin myths overlooks their foundations in 'being working-class.' That said, the point he makes is that these origin stories are so integral to people's middle-class identities that even when an economic crisis hits and their economic position witnesses a dramatic fall, the self-identification as middle-class persists. In other words, these family history narratives serve as primary building blocks for the family identity and for the family's class identity (Shore & Kauko 2015:24; Visacovsky 2014). The proliferation of those narratives across the population who "came from the ships" further fortifies such identities, eventually rendering them socially normative.

Visacovsky's research findings stand in juxtaposition to how origin narratives are constructed in Santiago. This contrast shines through the student works I describe in the

beginning of this chapter. The long accounts of how one's great-great-grandparents arrived in Buenos Aires in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, are almost opposite to the self-identified criollos' short descriptions of where in the province –if known– their grandparents were born. It is as if knowledge of one's family lineage beyond the past three generations had simply vanished somewhere down the line. For the most part, the life history interviews I conducted with my informants across the different field sites verified the 'three-generations rule.' Moreover, they also corresponded to how Dr. Drube's students discussed their family lineages in Dr. Drube's course's final projects I have discussed in the beginning of this chapter. But most fascinatingly, the narratives revealed the reversal of the *Porteño* middle-class origin myths. Instead of explaining what one was (a middle-class person who came from the ships) as *an outcome* of one's family lineage, my informants discussed how they had become who they now were *despite* their family lineage –or effectively the lack thereof. An interview with Marito (29), the head coach in Santiago's women's basketball team and also a manager in one of the Ironsport gyms, is a case in point.

Basically everybody in my family are carpenters, I mean in Loreto [Marito's town] if your surname is Mansilla, you're a carpenter. And obviously I was supposed to become a carpenter as well, I started helping my dad already when I was about ten. He was a typical machista, you know, "I'm the boss of the family, I bring the money, I decide when we eat" and all kinds of other such attitudes. His dad was a carpenter as well, and maybe his granddad too but I'm not sure, I don't know much about them, but I think they must be all from Santiago on my dad's side, and I guess they must've all been carpenters [laughs].

S: How much do you know about your grandparents; do you know where they came from?

M: Well now that you ask... my grandma's surname on my mom's side was actually something strange, like Miletovic, maybe from somewhere in Germany or Slovakia, somewhere there, but my granddad was simply a Diaz, imagine the difference! And it's funny because my mom is dark like myself, but her mother was a *real gringa*, fair skin and blue eyes! And now some of us cousins are dark

and others look like gringos as well, beautiful kids with light skin and blue eyes! [laughs].

S: How did you end up moving to Santiago?

M: I always wanted to study physical education, but it was difficult since my family's economic situation was hard and also because I guess I was expected to become a carpenter. I had to work since I was 12 years old and use my salary for buying food or other things for the family; I definitely learnt early what value money has! But later thanks to my mom's sacrifices, I was able to move to Santiago and start in the *profesorado*. I remember my pension then cost me 150 pesos per month and another 30 per week for food and photocopies. And on weekends I went back to Loreto and worked...

...Now that I have my own house, I have a car, I have a stable income...I often feel like I still can't really enjoy having money, it's like I feel guilty because I still have siblings who don't own their houses but have to rent, and their salaries aren't good. But I know it shouldn't be like that because I wake up 5am to go to work and return at night, and my life in that sense is a constant sacrifice...But often I feel like I have to continue to help my family, especially my mother because I don't think I would've ever studied or got where I am without her support!

Marito's account is similar to the other life histories I collected during my field work. Family histories of *machismo*, separations and also domestic violence were sadly common tropes in my informants' descriptions of their backgrounds; idealizations of a family idyll not at all. Also similar to Marito's example, most of those whom I interviewed could not tell much about their family genealogy beyond their grandparents' generation. At the same time, what commonly shone through the narratives was the storyline of contrasting one's family past with one's current socioeconomic situation. Take the case of Teresa, 42, a lawyer who graduated from the University of Tucuman and now practices criminal law in Santiago. When I meet her for an interview, she brings pictures of her family with her. "I don't have many pictures because where I come from, people definitely didn't have cameras!", she says and laughs. In one of the pictures she stands next to her parents, her father wearing a typical criollo beret holding a horse by the reins. "We lived in the *monte*, two hours from Santiago the capital, in a typical *rancho* and didn't

even have running water.<sup>35</sup> I know my family had always lived there, my ancestors are *indios* and my grandmother still spoke Quichua.” Currently Teresa is studying a diploma in Quichua language in the National University and is avidly interested in discovering her and her family’s cultural roots. Still, in her eloquent narratives, the meaning of *Indio* seems to have a double life as a descriptor of indigenous people, and as a reference to somebody culturally backward.

It’s ridiculous to say *Indios* are lazy or uneducated, it’s just about different cultural norms and we shouldn’t judge them only in relation to what is hegemonic, you know, the western culture that we are brought up into. I think the prevalent culture, in Santiago and Argentina in general, tries to erase *our* past, and so *we* start also believing that we just don’t have...you know... a past.

Later: My dad had that primitive mentality, of a typical *Indio* [emphasizes the pronunciation], that girls shouldn’t study, so when I was 17 and told him I wanted to become a lawyer, he basically prohibited me to leave home. He probably thought I’d eventually become a maid in Santiago, that’s what everybody thought in my family and that’s what people generally thought where I come from... well with the exception of one aunt who moved to Buenos Aires and found work there. She encouraged me to do what I aspired to study.

Teresa is visibly proud of having become a lawyer. She has does not have partner or children, and in all senses, she seems to defy the norms that her family understood as an acceptable way of life for a woman. She tells me what a wonderful time she had in Tucuman, discovering herself and her potential. Yet she also describes the university elitism and how it exposed the racial divisions that, according to her, mark the world of white-collar professionals. And these divisions, she says, also reflect in other realms.

When I took a plane for the first time from Santiago to Buenos Aires and walked through the aisle to my seat, I remember how people looked at me, like what was *I* doing there? And I looked back at them! It’s just one of those things, you know, where you feel your difference, but still, this *India* was probably much better educated than most on that plane [laughs].

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<sup>35</sup> *Rancho* is usually a construction that resembles more a shelter than a house. It rarely has paved floors or a roof other than one made of fiber class. A rancho is small and usually has only one room that all family members must share.

While Teresa laughs as she describes her experience on the plane, there is also a strong sense of defiance that shines through her account. Moreover, the account tacitly articulates her positionality in terms of being *an India*. On one hand, her description of people on the plane looking at her is telling of her understanding of the popular sociocultural perceptions of being *Indio* ('backwardly', 'uncivilized') in Argentina. On the other hand, she exposes the erroneousness of these perceptions by revealing herself as an educated *India* who is anything but 'backwardly,' and not only that; probably much less 'backwardly' than her fellow (white) passengers. She is on a plane –an expensive way to travel in Argentina– *despite* being *India*, and, furthermore, she is travelling to Buenos Aires as an *India Santiagueña*, not to work as a maid, but, as she tells me, to take a vacation and see her aunt.

When projected against the Argentine master narrative of ships, Europeans and middle-classness, my informants' life histories stand out as a kind of alternative origin narrative. Both stories are descriptions of socioeconomic mobility, however the foundations for that mobility – the essence of the story itself– stand in stark contrast against each other. One is justificatory and establishes a causal relationship between one's family past and one's current class identification. The other, i.e. the alternative one, is a narrative construction based on contrast, suggesting that "*despite* my past being that, I am now this." Further, the shape of the alternative origin narratives is drawn to a different scale: they make no claims to the generalizable. Instead, they demand social acknowledgement and by extension, legitimacy. The contrast between the two origin stories also parallels how people in the (Northern) interior perceive the sociocultural hemisphere of Buenos Aires. Across my field sites and beyond, my informants would refer to the capital city as a culturally distant place where people are arrogant and life "too busy." It was not only criollos with their family roots in firmly in Santiago who would think that way. Whether third-



generation Spaniards or descendants of indigenous peoples, almost invariably people would have a negative view on Buenos Aires and *Porteños* –people from Buenos Aires. Those views revealed Santiagueños’ annoyance with how inhabitants in the capital city would look down upon their northern compatriots. They also revealed a trace of defiance. Comments such as “Porteños think Argentina ends in Buenos Aires’s suburbs but they have no idea,” or “When I travel (abroad) and people ask me where I’m from, I say I’m from Argentina but *not* from Buenos Aires, because people abroad don’t like Porteños either” speak of what one of my informants across the socioeconomic spectrum called “provincial pride.” There is a certain analogy between my informants’ defiant origin narratives (“*despite* my roots, I have gotten this far”) and their contrast with the Argentine origin master narrative, and my informants’ antagonistic and defiant comments about Porteños. Just as the alternative origin stories seek to assert their validity and legitimacy next to the master narrative, Santiagueños’ attitudes towards Buenos Aires and Porteños challenge their sociocultural hegemony.

### **Entrepreneurial empowerment and claims to legitimacy**

This chapter has drawn an image of Argentina’s and Santiago’s historical and social landscape where the construction of racial and class identities are tightly braided together. Those identities are processual; constantly negotiated and situated against the historical circumstances that have contextualized their making. The last section discusses entrepreneurialism, analyzing it as an axis of its own that intersects with understandings of class, i.e. middle-classness and race, i.e. being criollo. Throughout this dissertation, I conceptualize entrepreneurialism as an umbrella that contains entrepreneurship as ‘doing business,’ and entrepreneurialism as an attitude and a way of being (cf. Freeman 2014). That a business-owner is ‘entrepreneurial’ usually goes without saying. However, considering oneself or being perceived as entrepreneurial by others

does not necessarily mean one must own a business. Thus, given that my research does not focus on business-owners exclusively, it makes sense to use the term entrepreneurialism as a referent to one's occupation and also a specific way of being and a sense of self. Being an entrepreneur is constitutive of an identity that is less contingent upon traditional perceptions and representations of race than middle-classness. At the same time, entrepreneurialism offers opportunities for socioeconomic mobility that the social imaginaries of middle-classness are firmly rooted in. One could therefore imagine entrepreneurialism as a way to bypass the historical hierarchies of class and race. As the previous sections have shown, what is at stake in those hierarchies is status and legitimacy: who is a rightful Argentine, who is a *respectable* and *decent* citizen, and who are the inconvenient *others*. But today, also entrepreneurialism is a legitimizing force that one can harness regardless of one's race or class position. Like a moral imperative, it serves as an alternative principle (to middle-classness) by which people can be divided into those who are respectable, responsible and contributing citizens, and those who are not. Today, it is not necessarily solely 'being middle-class' that stands in opposition to being, for instance, a *negro*, i.e. lazy, unambitious, uneducated, etc. It is those who are considered entrepreneurial and entrepreneurs of any sort that now get to draw the boundaries of social belonging and inclusion.

This step towards legitimacy becomes palpable in how Julia, 36, talks about her life. I have known her since my pilot research in 2014. When I first met her, she was working double shift at a bakery while her husband, Gustavo, worked as a carpenter. During my subsequent visits in Santiago, I often saw Julia in the bakery and chatted with her without too many concerns regarding my research. In 2016, I heard from another bakery worker that Julia had set up a business. When I asked Julia about this, she was rather coy and downplayed it, saying that it was "just something she'd gotten [herself] into." At that point, the "something" was making and

painting small household articles, namely jewelry boxes, napkin holders, photo frames and such. She had taken a decorative painting class “to get her mind off everyday stress” and discovered she was actually quite skillful. As I interview her in 2017, her production has grown in volume and diversity, and now also includes e.g. mirror cases and children’s furniture. Moreover, she has started to work only part-time and is preparing to open her own store on the bottom floor of her two-story house. Sitting with her, Gustavo and my recorder in their kitchen one day, I ask Julia to tell me how she started her business.

At first it was just something I did at home for myself, but then a friend who was visiting saw one of my boxes and asked if she could buy it. I didn’t let her pay but just gave it to her. But that’s when I, like, I got the bug, when I started thinking that maybe I could do something with this. So, one day I come home and I tell Gus, and what if you make a few more boxes so that I’ll see if I can sell them through Facebook. And that’s how it began, with those first boxes that were pretty ugly [laughs], and they all sold. So I started making more, and Gus started making different things in his workshop, I mean not just boxes but for instance small jewelry drawers, and photo frames, because he has all the machines in his workshop. Can you believe, now we participate in four fairs a year!

Look, if I had told my mother and sisters five years ago that I would become an entrepreneur, they would’ve laughed. I mean, I’ve always been the one in my family to fight and push forward, my sisters, they’ve stayed in my old neighborhood [an area in the city’s periphery that is still among the poorest in the city], you know, like a neighborhood of *negros*, but I managed to leave... I don’t think they envy me, but they’re proud of me. I mean *even* Don Camacho [the bakery owner] tells me he is proud of me and lets me take a day off when I’m selling at a fair; his wife has even bought things from me. Ha, when I started working there, I think they just thought I was a *negra*! [laughs].

In July 2017, Julia and Gustavo have a stand in Santiago’s annual fair. This is not a small feat for the fair stays on throughout the month and attracts thousands of visitors from Santiago and beyond. Apparently only 15% of the applicants had gotten a place in the fair –an estimate I get from a person working in the fair’s organization. For Julia and Gustavo the month is an economic deal breaker, giving them the possibility to finally invest in a new car (still used, but newer than their old car). One evening when I am visiting their stand, I ask Gustavo about their

clientele – what kinds of people buy their products. Significantly lowering his voice, he tells me that there are some people who have *lots* of money. He makes a gesture indicating cash with his fingers and continues to tell me that Julia and he have also priced their products so that “not anybody” can buy them. As I’m conversing with Gustavo, a mother and a daughter, both dressed in fancy peacoats and colorful scarves (in July, the winter in Santiago is at its peak) come to look at Julia’s stand. They chat with her for a while as I continue my conversation with Gustavo. When the pair leaves, having purchased a large jewelry box with various compartments and an attached mirror, I overhear the mother’s comment: “look at these people, that woman is *really guapa*.” While the word *guapo* in Spanish usually means beautiful, in Santiago it means somebody who is admirably hard-working.



Julia and Gustavo at their fair stand in July 2017

On yet another occasion, I am visiting Julia and Gustavo in their home. We talk about class mobility and how they have experienced their economic growth. I ask them directly about

their ideas of entrepreneurialism and what they think about their class position in Santiago. Julia jumps right in:

Look, I'm like a work addict, I just can't be without doing *something*, and that's something I learnt at home. We were quite poor, but my parents worked as much as they could, like all of us children –and I have seven siblings! To be honest, it wasn't easy, and I was able to finish high school because I took evening classes, during the day I worked. Since forever, I've saved money and not spent on stupidities; I mean, I didn't take vacations from work for 11 years! But thanks to those savings, look at the place we have, and Gus is such a talented carpenter, that my family who visits and sees our place say it looks like from some TV show. So, I honestly think, some people would now say that we're middle-class, I don't know, or maybe lower middle class?

Julia looks at Gustavo, who continues:

And well, I think yes, yes, we're maybe middle class now. I mean we both come from *humble* backgrounds, like especially Juli, and now we have a house and soon a newer car, and when our kids grow up they'll go to a university... isn't that what you study? [laughs] You know, people say that everybody is 'middle-class' but that's just the politicians lying, because we definitely were never middle-class, we *know* the difference. A lot of people who are born with everything they have can say they are middle-class because they don't know what it means to be anything else! And it's very difficult to climb in this society, especially for people like *us*, everything is just more difficult. But thanks to god, my family for instance has always been a carpenter family so the workshop has belonged to my grandfather and then my dad and now me, and that kind of stuff keeps you from *sinking*. And now with Juli's *emprendimiento*, even my workshop is growing! I think people look at you differently when they see you expand, like expanding my workshop and our future store local downstairs, you know, people see that you're actually working and *creating* things.

You ask about entrepreneurialism, and I think there you have your answer! It's like people who are entrepreneurs are those who create new things, don't stop when things get hard, and don't stay happy just with some stinking job at the municipality that pays their social security and fixed salary until they retire. I mean, the only way to make this country better is with people like Juli [admiringly looks at his wife], who are real entrepreneurs. I mean those who *really* work, not like those rich businessmen who run the country through politicians who are like their expensive prostitutes!

Sara: Do you think being entrepreneur is the same as being middle-class?

Gus: No, I mean...

Julia: Look, I think as an entrepreneur, you can kind of build a life that could be seen, you know, as middle-class life. I think that's happened to us, because before this business started picking up, we just lived saving what little we could, and didn't dare to put our savings anywhere. And mind you, you know how we live, we don't spend on anything extra now either. But you know, it's those small things that are huge, like being able to go on *vacations* to Buenos Aires to see my sister!

Julia's and Gustavo's narratives are riddled with allusions to socioeconomic mobility, even when I do not directly ask about it. Variations of the term 'entrepreneurialism' appear in their speech quite often, much more so than direct mentions to class. Moreover, at times it seems like any iteration of the word 'entrepreneurial' is simply a shorthand for longer descriptions expressing social mobility and economic ascent.<sup>36</sup> Yet in Julia's imaginaries, understandings of entrepreneurialism are first and foremost linked to a specific social status. It is a status that earns her respect. Take for instance Julia's boss, who is "proud" of Julia for doing what she does or the customers who openly express their admiration for Julia's production. Having become an entrepreneur has enabled Julia –and Gustavo– to accrue social and economic capital in ways that previously was not possible. Expanding buyer-seller networks, contacts in different kinds of fairs and also the business's growing presence in the social media all serve as avenues towards generating trust, success, and respect. Similarly, accessing material goods, being able to take vacations, or planning to send children to a university are the constantly evolving outcome of one's entrepreneurial activities. As Julia herself says, being entrepreneurial can lead to a social status and lifestyle that is commonly associated with middle-classness. But as her (and Gustavo's) narratives also show, this does not mean that middle-class automatically becomes a self-identification in and of itself.

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<sup>36</sup> I also had informants who unwaveringly deemed themselves entrepreneurs despite their economic situations not having changed for years. It was precisely these people who reinforced the idea that being entrepreneurial need not be exclusively linked to business activities or the accrual of economic capital.

That ‘entrepreneur’ has become such a pervasive way to identify or characterize oneself as is related to the ubiquity of the term in the everyday public and political discourse. While in the field, I often wondered whether such a discursive emphasis on entrepreneurialism had longer roots in the past or was rather an outcome of today’s neoliberal ideologies that prioritize the individual over the collective and the private over the public. For example, I once asked Hernán, 36, if he had ever heard his parents refer to themselves or to their relatives and friends as entrepreneurs. I knew the last three generations of his family had primarily dedicated themselves to small business as storekeepers of different sorts. Hernán, himself a bakery owner, laughed and said that he did not think there were any entrepreneurs in his family before his generation. Knowledgeable of my research and an avid conversationalist on current political and economic affairs, his affectionately sarcastic comment was: “Sara, haven’t you understood that before our generation, shopkeepers weren’t entrepreneurs? They were simply shopkeepers!” Then he said with less affectionate sarcasm that: “Today, if you just *think* about opening a shop, you’re already an entrepreneur.” I could see the point Hernán was making. The myriad grammatical variations revolving around the word ‘entrepreneurial’ have melded into everyday vocabularies across the whole socioeconomic spectrum and become commonly accessible verbs, nouns, adjectives, etc. Moreover, the inherently positive connotations that terms such as entrepreneurial, entrepreneur, entrepreneurialism etc. carry make it a welcomed and fashionable expression in the vernacular, and a trendy way to call oneself.

The proliferation of entrepreneurial imaginaries through the media, public campaigns or political propaganda today harks back to how imaginaries of middle-classness were disseminated in the 1940s. As Ezequiel Adamovsky (2009) points out, the anti-Peronist media in the 1940s played an important role in consolidating collective perceptions of what the middle class was and

what it meant. The term itself began to circulate widely, being used as an objective economic category as well as a source of satire and an object of parody. Yet regardless of the purposes of how the term was employed, the point is that it became democratized and imbued with material and symbolic meaning. More than six decades later, something similar has happened with the concept of entrepreneurialism and the figure of an entrepreneur. As José Natanson writes, “the entrepreneur is the capitalist hero of the 21<sup>st</sup> century” (2016:1), and the embodiment of our contemporary neoliberal values (Dardot & Laval 2013). ‘Entrepreneur’ has become a common-place noun to signify modern, respectable, and legitimate citizens. Likewise, ‘entrepreneurial’ has become a common-place adjective to describe what successful and productive citizens are like. But perhaps more than anything, the idea of an entrepreneur evokes understandings (or fantasies) of freedom and, by way of extension, *mobility*. In a way, being an entrepreneur is like an identity document –a passport of sorts– that offers one (the illusion of having) access to territories stretching across different class boundaries.

## **Conclusion**

In September 2016, president Mauricio Macri gave a presentation in Argentina’s Business and Investment Forum that was broadcast on one of the national TV channels. Speaking in front of an audience of foreign investors and representatives of multinational companies, Macri said that “Argentina was a country of entrepreneurs.” He then continued: “Argentina has a wonderful entrepreneurial capacity because of where we come from. We are descendants of all parts of the world...the immigrants were the true entrepreneurs who came here...without anybody telling them what awaited them on the *other side of the Ocean*” (Macri 2016. Translation and emphasis mine). Within just a few sentences, Macri was able to synthesize

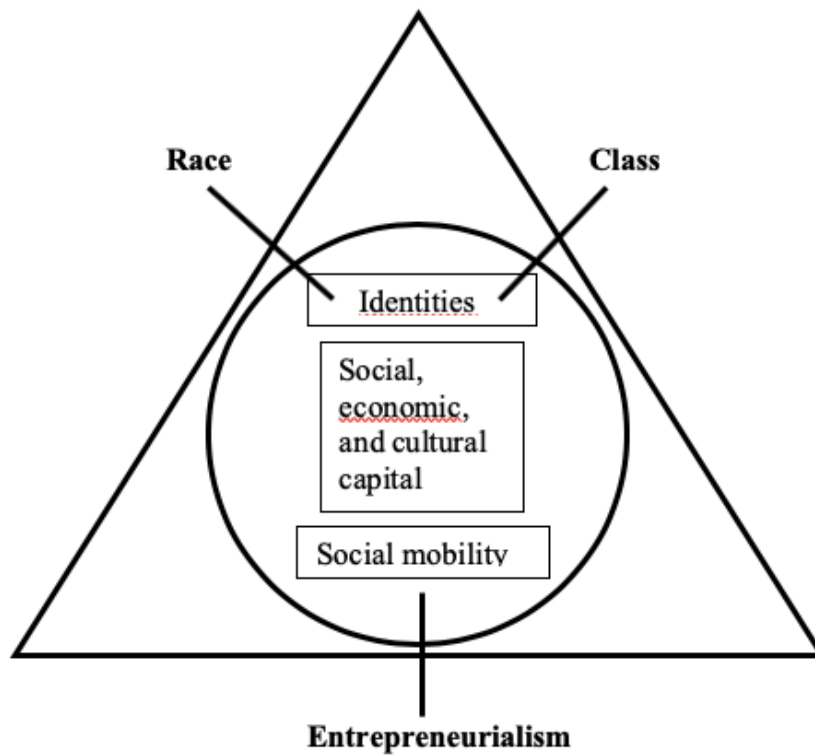


some of the fundamental ideas of Argentine-ness. By virtue of being the president of the country and by expressing those ideas in a televised speech, he also provided them with a fresh air of validation. The logic behind Macri's statement presumes that Argentines have "entrepreneurial capacities" because they are descendants of immigrants, who, in turn, were entrepreneurs because they were brave, innovative, hard-working etc. Furthermore, they were entrepreneurs because they braved the Ocean with keenness to embrace the *unknown* on its other side. In other words, the generalized perceptions of Argentines as descendants of immigrants comes with the tacit assumption that those immigrants were from overseas and hence, most likely, European.

As this chapter has shown, the above-described logic overlooks the very fact that by no means *all* Argentines came from the ships. However, despite being yet another essentializing cliché, Macri's opening sentence that "Argentina is a country of entrepreneurs," beckons meaningfully towards the country's hinterlands: does it not mean that Argentines in the north, those mixed-race criollos who did not come from the ships, can *also* be entrepreneurs? And if they can, what does it mean in terms of their racial and class identities, and their position vis-à-vis racialized and classist notions of Argentine-ness? In this chapter, I have offered an overview onto the social and historical moorings that those questions are tied to and that the dissertation on the whole aims to respond. I have discussed the evolving relationships between criollo-ness, middle-classness, and whiteness, and shown how these relationships are shaped as much by national myths as by changing socioeconomic conditions. Historically, race has been the ultimate obstacle impeding one to ascend in the socioeconomic ladder –race in the sense of being something other than white. By that same logic, being middle-class has not only been associated with whiteness, but has been, in fact, constructed on the basis of racializing the idea of class writ large. My research shows that today, criollos can subtly challenge this logic by subscribing to the

widely shared understandings of what it means to be an entrepreneur. The last section of this chapter has discussed entrepreneurialism as a legitimizing force that empowers criollos to defy the traditional hierarchies of race and class. Being an entrepreneur or being seen as entrepreneurial, offers a new pathway towards the accumulation of different kinds of capital and hence social mobility. While social mobility may lead to a lifestyle often associated with middle-classness (property, vacations, private education, etc.), such a lifestyle does not necessarily pivot around self-identification as middle-class. Instead, for criollos –historically barred from being middle-class to begin with– the pivot is their self-identification as entrepreneurs: their entrepreneurial activities and attitude becomes their passport to accessing territories of socioeconomic mobility.

Finally, this chapter one has offered a view onto the questions that are at stake within the framework of my research in general. I have delineated a triangle in which each tangent represents a key research area: the historical and current meanings of race; the historical and current understandings of class –the middle class in particular– and entrepreneurialism as a concept that today offers an excellent framework for analyzing the above two. Within that triangle, there is a field where racial and class identities and aspirations for social mobility are constantly negotiated and contested. As the ethnographic chapters in this dissertation illustrate, those dynamic processes revolve around the acquisition of different forms of capital: social, economic, and cultural.



The graph above visualizes this triangle and draws the contours of my approach to the research problem in general: how criollos can access socioeconomic mobility by becoming entrepreneurs/being entrepreneurial, and how “criollo entrepreneurialism” challenges the historical parameters of class and race. In the following chapter, I will discuss the literature that informs my research on the whole, thereby framing through theory what the rest of this dissertation examines through ethnography.

## Chapter 2: Forms of *capital* and the ‘entrepreneurial framework’ of race, class, and status

### Introduction

When I arrived in Santiago in August 2016 to start my fieldwork, I expected to hear explicit accounts on people’s understandings of their class position, socioeconomic ascent, and their ideas of middle-classness. I assumed my informants would readily self-identify as or articulate their desire to belong to the middle class and bring up the term spontaneously in our conversations and interviews. I was mistaken. While I did have conversations about middle-classness with my informants, the topic –simply the term itself– often came up only when I purposively elicited it. But the term entrepreneur came up often, whether as a self-identification or an approving description of others. Therefore, it was during my fieldwork that I began to read more about the theoretical perspectives and scholarly approaches to entrepreneurialism. Furthermore, in that concept, I discovered what I had begun to see as a missing piece from the way I was thinking about the relationship of race and class mobility in practice. What I had been learning is that social mobility and race had a dynamic relationship that concealed aspirations, inequalities, struggles over dominance, etc.; that the categories of race and class were porous, contested and shifting, and what was at stake in the shifts was socioeconomic status. In other words, what I was discovering in Santiago was what many other anthropologists had discovered and analyzed in a whole host of other contexts across the world.

‘Discovering’ entrepreneurialism enabled me to start seeing things in a different light. It added a third element –or a third dimension– to how I had been thinking about criollos’ social mobility. Rather than analyzing race through the lens of social mobility and social mobility

through the lens of race, entrepreneurialism offered a lens to examine both at once. It also helped me to define my theoretical framework through which I could analyze the co-constitutive relationship between race and social mobility. As I read more about scholarly perspectives on the topic while listening to my informants without filters of expectation, I began to consider entrepreneurialism as a foundation for a kind of class segment of its own. Unlike the middle class, which in the Argentine context is historically rooted in racial exclusion, being an entrepreneur or entrepreneurial appeared to foster inclusion, serving as a social category accessible also to criollo Santiagueños. Entrepreneurialism could be mobilized as a way to challenge the traditional imaginaries of the middle class and its relationship to race. Yet at the same time, the social processes underpinning people's self-identifications as entrepreneurs or entrepreneurial corresponded to those that are understood as integral to upward mobility and the ascent to the middle class. Even if my informants did not directly express their aspirations to belong to the middle class, the idea of that class still lived underneath their desires to accumulate different capitals and achieve a certain social status. This quandary persisted throughout my research, usually driving it and pushing it forward, and at times, making the task seem highly challenging. The ethnographic chapters in this dissertation illustrate how the complex and mutually constitutive relationship between class and social mobility, race, and entrepreneurialism unfold in my informants' everyday lives. The following pages unravel that relationship through relevant literature and theory.

The purpose of this chapter is to unpack and discuss the theoretical field where I situate my research and thereby build the structures that frame the ethnographic and empirical data in the following chapters. The fundamental question here is –how can criollos, racially different and differentiated from Argentina's white population, become socially mobile when history has

dictated that their place be in the society's stagnated margins? From a theoretical perspective, analyzing the relationship between race and social mobility in Santiago necessitates a closer examination on the relationship between class –specifically middle class– and status. Aspiration and social mobility are deeply entrenched in the construction of the middle class and imaginaries of middle-classness. In the Argentine context, being middle class is closely associated with having European origins and in terms of race, with being white. The problem therefore is – how is it possible for criollos to overcome these racial barriers in their quest to social mobility, and what kinds of strategies can they mobilize in order to be able to climb on the socioeconomic ladder? I propose that one answer to this lies in entrepreneurialism, both as a practice, and as an attitude and a way of life. Becoming or self-identifying as an entrepreneur offers criollos social acceptance and legitimacy in a world where the entrepreneurial agent is the protagonist in shared imaginaries of socioeconomic success. This alone, however, does not suffice to explain the workings of the contesting relationship between being criollo and being middle-class. Thus, I argue that being an entrepreneur or entrepreneurial grants criollos a novel kind of *status*; status that is anchored in widely applauded social traits and qualities such as responsibility, risk-taking, resilience, innovativeness, and flexibility. Achieving higher social status does not automatically mean that criollos become middle-class in the sense how national imaginaries portray middle-classness (i.e. European origins, fair skin, inter-generational economic mobility, higher education, etc.). Yet it allows them to slightly bypass the rigid, vertically organized relationship between class and race and become socially mobile through entrepreneurial status building. In that sense, as part of my theoretical framework, I approach the relationship between class and status as dynamic and dialectical; at times, divergent and other times mutually constitutive.

I use the concept of physical, social, economic, and cultural capital as my vehicle of analysis to understand how these theoretical propositions translate into and are shaped and sustained by practice. The acquisition of physical, social, cultural, and economic capital through different entrepreneurial means has started to make social mobility possible also for criollos. This begs the question of how understandings of entrepreneurialism convert into practice and strong social identities, as well as changing material realities. As practices and novel self-identifications, entrepreneurialism/being entrepreneurial harbors the potential to challenge middle-classness as the principal yardstick that measures criollos' success in the quest for social mobility. At the same time, ascending in terms of one's social status, which follows from accumulating different forms of capital, helps criollos to access to what is widely considered as middle-class *lifestyle*. Beyond the material realities of e.g. property-ownership or home furnishing style, leisure activities such as traveling, eating out in certain kinds of restaurants, or having hobbies that are in vogue (in Santiago e.g. yoga, zumba dancing, cross-fit) are powerful lifestyle markers. They also hold discursive power. People convert their experiences into narratives that on one hand mark one's distance and distinction from those who are socioeconomically less privileged. On the other hand, the narratives are relatable among others with similar experiences. The narratives therefore imbue the experience of e.g. having a drink at a trendy beer pub instead at the neighborhood bar with shared symbolic value. And while they portray and buttress one's social status, they also crystallize the meanings of a middle-class lifestyle.<sup>37</sup> The ethnographic data in the previous and the following chapters show how the

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<sup>37</sup> In *Consumption Intensified* (2002), Maureen O'Dougherty discusses meanings of middle-classness amid an economic downturn in Brazil. As she shows, property or private education are principal definers of middle-classness. Her analysis, however, concerns mostly other consumption habits, such as families' shopping pilgrimages to Miami and vacations in Disneyland. She then argues that such consumptions models make *being middle-class* an identity supported by symbolism and material culture, everyday practices, and discourse.

processes of converting different capitals into status currency and aspiring for social mobility through entrepreneurialism unfold in practice. In this chapter, I offer a bird's eye view onto the landscape of theory that helps me to analyze that empirical data in practice.

### **Chapter structure**

My research follows Bourdieu's theories on social classes as relational social constructions situated in different social spaces (1987, 2010). Therefore, the part of this chapter that discusses literature on class and socioeconomic mobility is rooted almost exclusively to Bourdieuan approaches that social scientists have applied in their research on class. I begin by unpacking Bourdieu's understandings of social classes and their meaning in general. Following this, I examine the concept of *social space*; that is, the social environment in which different classes materialize in relation to one another; where power is constantly aspired for and negotiated between different social groups, and where the acquisition and accumulation of *capital* determines socioeconomic hierarchies. The question of capital –social, economic, and cultural– in relation to social mobility in Bourdieu's work is less pronounced than his concern with capital and what constitutes a class or defines class membership. In my research, I centralize the relationship between social mobility and capital. In that sense, I borrow from and also build on Bourdieu's work as I mobilize the concept of capital towards better understanding what constitutes the *movement* between perceived classes.

Social mobility is rooted in aspiration towards ascent, and fear of losing what one has achieved and falling downwards. In its widest socioeconomic sense, social mobility refers to any movement in the vast spectrum of social positions, whether economic or of prestige. Zooming into it more reveals how linked understandings of social mobility are with conceptions of the



middle class. While my dissertation analyzes less the middle class *per se* than its representations for those who are historically excluded from it, literature concerning the middle classes is still crucial to my work. After the section on class, status, and capital, I therefore provide an overview of some of the central inquiries in middle class -related research. Following this, I briefly change the focus and explore the complex question of race and ethnicity in Latin American and especially the Argentine context. This intervention foreshadows the subsequent analysis on the (often contentious) relationship between middle-classness and race, or middle-class and racial identities. I review some key approaches to how socioeconomic mobility and the aspiration to become middle-class inform ethno-racial identities in different geographic and cultural contexts.

The last section begins with an analysis on entrepreneurialism and entrepreneurship in academic research. Specifically, I examine literature that ties meanings of entrepreneurialism with understandings of one's sense of self. But I also ask – how is it that being an entrepreneur or being entrepreneurial is now so much in vogue, and how have today's models of entrepreneurialism come about? Borrowing from recent literature on neoliberalism, I argue that neoliberal ideologies have permeated societies from their political and economic agendas to their sociocultural moorings. This process is causally linked with the birth of today's neoliberal subjectivity which undergirds the making of entrepreneurial identities. As the following ethnographic chapters show, this dissertation is not *about* neoliberalism, neither do I frame the analysis of my informants' everyday lives by discussing Argentina's current neoliberal political economy.<sup>38</sup> Nevertheless, anthropological literature on that topic has played a major role in shaping my understanding of what entrepreneurialism means. That literature has also enabled me

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<sup>38</sup> As I am writing these lines, the Argentine government is about to change. The presidential elections in October 2019 were won by a Peronist (left-wing) Alberto Fernandez. His electoral campaign and political agenda differ radically from president Mauricio Macri's right-wing, neoliberal government whom vast sectors of the population (evidenced by the electoral result) blame for the current economic crisis.

to decipher how entrepreneurialism has metamorphosed into a kind of social category of its own amid Argentina's changing political climate. As a "new way of the world" (Dardot & Laval 2013), neoliberalism effectively does serve as a wonderful framework for theorizing the construction of entrepreneurial identities. Furthermore, thinking about neoliberalism as a sociocultural world order rather than an economic doctrine makes it possible to examine how the figure of an entrepreneur has become a socially revered, 'legitimate citizen.'

### **I: On Bourdieu: where class and status meet and merge**

Class, Bourdieu argues, is a dynamic social construction that both conditions and is conditioned by the social structures, canons, and material and symbolic properties that people – agents – possess and are surrounded by. Class is not determined by any singular property, be it economic means, occupation, or level of education. Neither is it defined by what he deems "independent variables" – namely sex (or gender), age, race, or ethnic, geographical or social origins. Contrary to Marxist tradition, Bourdieu argues that one's position in relation to the division of labor and relationships of production alone is not sufficient to establish and describe distinct social classes, nor the struggles between them. Instead, class results from the constant interactions between these different properties and the changing value that the agents and groups occupying different social spaces ascribe to them (2010). What constitutes the social space, are different forms of capital. Economic, cultural, and social capital, which I will elaborate more on in the following pages, establish the axes of height, width and depth that frame the multi-dimensional social space. An agent's position within the social space results from one's social

trajectory and the composition and volume of the capital one possesses and strives to accumulate.<sup>39</sup>

One's place in the social space is a reflection of what Bourdieu famously deems the class *habitus*. Not only related to the volume of capital but also the social and institutional value given to the capital, the habitus is a set of “unifying and practice-generating principles...; the internalized form of class condition and of the conditioning it entails” (2010:95). The class habitus is framed by the logic by which one structures and is structured by the surrounding social and institutional world; it undergirds one's subjectivity and understandings of oneself. Further, the class habitus entails one's possession of different capitals while at the same time orienting one's disposition to associate with those whose volume and constitution of capital reflects that of one's own. Therefore, the similarity of agents' habituses mirrors the perceived homogeneity of a given social class. It also rests in the heart of Bourdieu's argument about classes being characterized by homologies between cultural practices and preferences, level (and the field) of education, and economic capital. In fact, one of the central theses in Bourdieu's *Distinction* (2010) is that those conceiving of themselves (and being perceived by others) as representatives of a particular class manifest their class position through their cultural consumption, be it artistic and culinary preferences or, for instance, sports.

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<sup>39</sup> It is important to note that in this dissertation, I approach the concept of class as a cultural category rather than objective, economically defined and bounded category. This does not mean that I intend to dispute the existence of labor division and ownership over means of production as markers used to define and organize society's socioeconomic structures. In fact, such understandings of class seem to be as important in guiding people's perceptions as are the imaginaries that tie the *idea* of class to different aspirations and fears, or ways of thinking and acting. As an ethnographer, it has been my task to tease out the subtle differences in how people discuss 'class' and 'class;' that is, class as an economic category and class as way to articulate one's being-in-the-world. How my informants make references to socioeconomic classes is not necessarily congruent. The meanings of class in their narratives seem situated and context-specific, often expressed through metonyms (e.g. *humilde* [humble] = lower class; *decente* [decent] = middle class; *de mucha cuna* [lit. 'of high cradle'] = upper class) or descriptions of lifestyle, occupation, material possessions etc. (e.g. 'they travel abroad every year;' 'they're *service* class [*clase servidora*]). Bearing this in mind, I approach the concept of class by examining its manifestations through culturally shared models and value systems and conceptualize it as a fundamental part of one's social identity.

Different social classes also contain their own internal struggles for power and dominance. The agents' habituses are interactive, and the intra-class logic that organizes them within the social space necessarily entails efforts to hierarchize. Individuals' efforts to accumulate capital and add to their assets may not lead to class mobility *per se*, but it keeps the workings of a given class in constant motion. An excellent example of this is how middle-class families in Istanbul, Turkey, compete over places in prestigious secondary schools. Henry Rutz and Erol Balkan (2009) analyze this educational competition in relation to the construction of middle-classness, which in Turkey is strongly rooted in ideals of "European sophistication and worldliness" (2009:71). Elite secondary schools promote these ideals, and having one's child study in one of them is highly coveted currency among Istanbul's middle-classes. But to access these schools, students must first take a standardized and rigorous entrance exam that is regulated by the state. Although the exam was set to weed out favoritism from educational selection and emphasize meritocracy, what it has ended up cultivating is a burgeoning market of private preparatory courses that prospective students take to excel in the entrance exam. It is the middle-class and affluent families who have generated that market and converted it into a field of competition among each other. The argument the authors make is that while good (or elite) primary and secondary education is considered elemental to being middle-class, among the middle-class families the competition over educational capital accumulation is fierce. What is at stake is not falling out of the socially perceive middle class but the agents' search for distinction, dominance and cultural superiority *within* that class.

Such intra-class struggles reflect the larger conflicts between different social spaces – that is, *inter*-class struggles rooted in the quest to power, dominance, and hegemony. These very battles reveal the relational nature of social classes in Bourdieu's theory. They demonstrate how

the concept of class is rooted in conflicts between groups that exist in and between different social spaces that are characterized by different social and cultural principles. By replacing the idea of a rigid, vertical class structure with the more flexible and dynamic social space, Bourdieu brings together the economic and symbolic dimensions of class. He sees them as intertwined, historically contingent variables that allow classes to be studied empirically. While much of his most famous studies on class concerned the French middle and upper-middle class, his theories are not necessarily tied to them. Instead, many scholars have applied his work in different class contexts, often with a specific focus on social inequalities and agents' socioeconomic mobility and aspirations for mobility between different classes. Garth Stahl's research on working-class boys' class identity construction and educational aspirations in South London is a case in point (2015; 2016). He argues that his informants' response to the neoliberal discourse on 'aspiration' that marks today's education comes from their "*egalitarian habitus* –an alternative to the middle-class self – which has been mediated through their working-class communal values that have themselves been perforated by the neoliberal ideology of the school" (2016:669). The boys thus negotiate their position between structure and agency through their awareness of the importance of educational (cultural) capital acquisition and also their adherence to the ideologies of "egalitarianism, where no one is 'above their station'" (ibid.). Jaime DeLuca (2013), on the other hand, approaches her research on white, upper-middle class membership in a swim club in the United States through the Bourdieuan lens of habitus and social capital. The swimming club serves as a site where the members continuously mark the boundaries of their class habitus through a sense of community and shared social capital –connections and social networks– in the club. As DeLuca shows, the club, in fact, is a place that provides the white, upper-middle class members a sense of safety. It excludes not only individuals from different socioeconomic classes

but also the ethno-racial ‘other’ (namely Afro-American and Hispanics) whose presence might destabilize the racial and class harmony that the members’ habituses are intimately tied to.<sup>40</sup>

These examples speak to the applicability of the Bourdieuan understandings of class, habitus, and capitals in different areas of especially social scientific research. This does not, however, mean that his theories would have gone unquestioned.

Bourdieu’s influence in social sciences reflects in the ample critique and even skepticism his theoretical approaches have been subjected to. From today’s perspective, his postulations may seem outdated given the radical social and economic development across different cultural contexts since the 1960s (Chan & Goldthorpe 2010; Erikson & Goldthorpe 1993; Fachelli & Lopez-Roldán 2017). David Goldthorpe argues that Bourdieu’s framework of capitals and social reproduction, for example, is too rigid and limited to reflect today’s socioeconomic realities. Class boundaries have become much more blurred than how Bourdieu conceived of them. Especially in terms of education (which I will elaborate on further in this chapter), Goldthorpe maintains that the theory of cultural capital reproduction fails to take into account state-led efforts to potentiate working-class students through education (Goldthorpe 2010). Further, some also consider Bourdieu’s work limited in terms of its geographical extent, accusing him of national insularity and paying little attention to variation beyond the French class structure. This is exemplified by Richard Peterson’s and Albert Simkus’s (1992) work on musical tastes among American upper-middle classes (cf. Peterson & Kern 1996). Contrary to Bourdieu’s argument that ‘high-brow’ cultural tastes correlate with middle/upper-middle membership, Peterson and Simkus argue that in the United States, the middle/ upper-middle class express their class

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<sup>40</sup> See also Will Atkinson’s (2010) sweeping analysis on class across different life domains, such as education, work, and lifestyle, where he reiterates (as in all his work) the importance of Bourdieuan theory to better understanding not what *constitutes* class, but how it *manifests* in practice (2010: 15).

position and cultural mobility through ‘omnivorous’ cultural taste. The authors thus reject the idea that cultural tastes be classified vertically as ‘low-brow’ vs. ‘high-brow.’ Instead, their “omnivore vs. univore” thesis posits that the dominant classes show a wide range of cultural tastes while lower classes’ cultural preferences tend to be more limited. In doing so, they point to the differences in how classes are understood and experienced in different geographical and cultural contexts, and that the theoretical conclusions derived from one may not be applicable elsewhere. In broader terms, one could argue that Bourdieu’s concept of space and field cannot be transported easily to transnational or migration studies. Following this, Bennett et al. (2009) show how members of different ethnic groups who self-identify as middle class in England establish their belonging through myriad, culturally transnational tastes and references. In that sense, to examine ethnic minorities’ social space through the lens of cultural capital demands a widening of that lens, which Bourdieu’s original work (in *Distinction*, 2010), the authors argue, does not offer.

What about status? In Bourdieu’s work, the concepts of class and status intersect and become mutually constitutive. Status, he argues, is simply the symbolic dimension of class; the dimension that is sustained less by economic than social and cultural capital. Yet scholars following a Weberian framework of class theory contest this. In Britain, John Goldthorpe and Tak Win Chan have written extensively about social stratification and the distinctions that should be made between class and status. Understanding these differences is necessary in order for us to understand how class relations work in contemporary societies (2004; 2007; cf. Goldthorpe & McKnight 2006). They argue that classes are fundamentally constructed through economic relations while shaped by life chances and choices. Contrary to Bourdieu’s relational approach, Weberian theorists define classes more clearly as social categories founded on economic means

and occupation, thereby emphasizing the distinction between class and status. Thus, the different categories that determine relations of labor, –employers, employees, or self-employed– become the blueprint of a class structure that is further influenced by one’s economic means or, say, the capacity to acquire property. In the Weberian tradition, status is understood as an intersubjective way to organize one’s social surroundings on the basis of inferiority, equality, and superiority (Chan & Goldthorpe 2004:383). Variables that affect one’s status are often social identity-related, such as ethnicity, religiosity or sexuality (Hechter 2004:404). It would be difficult to negate the existence of economic classes, i.e. income and property-based categories in contemporary capitalist societies (and elsewhere). Yet as Hechter argues, the principal tenets that have traditionally maintained a class-based social organization –“the impermeability of class boundaries, the strength of class organizational capacity, and the salience of class consciousness”– have radically decreased in “contemporary societies,” being replaced by status politics” (2004:403). Status therefore refers to a concept divorced from that of class. It represents a dimension of a societal organization that harbors cultural and symbolic practices without necessarily being linked to one’s economic position.

The problem with the kind of separation of status from class that for example Hechter advocates resides in the assumption that in “contemporary societies,” class in itself would have become less salient as a social and even political (or politicized) category. Has class consciousness truly decreased, or has it simply acquired different forms of expression and manifestations? That said, I agree with those critiquing Bourdieu’s lack of differentiation between class and status. My empirical research suggests that people’s understandings of class and status often intersect and that in everyday discourse, those concepts may be used synonymously. However, there are also a myriad of situations where status and class are referred



to as two very separate things. A wealthy person's comment about somebody of lower socioeconomic standing being "low-class but entrepreneurial" (*de clase baja pero emprendedor*) conceals an understanding of class and status –and they are not the same. In this dissertation, I specifically discuss entrepreneurialism as practice and an attitude that impacts an agent's social status. Further, as I show, to be entrepreneurial is not necessarily correlative with being of specific class. However, it can help one to achieve an economic bracket that places one in a specific class category and/or allow one to start considering oneself as of specific –in this case, namely middle– class.

On the Bordieuan side of the class-status debate, Will Atkinson (2015) argues that separating class and status is a forceful and even myopic way of approaching class and holds little ground when tested in practice. Following Bourdieu's endeavor to challenge the Weberian separation of class and status, Atkinson points to the importance of *lifestyle* as a clustering principle and a feature that strengthens societal understandings of class and enhances the understanding of classes as homologous constructs. Lifestyle as an embodied form of cultural capital entails a range of dimensions from material and cultural consumption to taste of judgement and aesthetics (Bourdieu 2010). The behavioral and ideological manifestations, which Weberian scholars attribute to the construction of status, fuse with economic means, education, and the familial inheritance of cultural appreciations in the Bordieuan approach (Atkinson, 2015). Just as Bourdieu claims that status, therefore, is the symbolic side of socioeconomic classes, Atkinson proposes that the idea of status stems from dominant behavioral and cultural models. These models are but an organizational principle people employ as they determine their place (or perceive that of others) vis-à-vis a given socioeconomic class (ibid). That people use

different kinds of criteria to structure the world around them is an integral part of being human.

Paraphrasing Bourdieu, Atkinson writes:

We carve up the world into categories and groups, name them and associate them with things, oppose them to other categories, define their features, gather with people we consider to be in the same category as us and sometimes even represent them and fight for them against others, as with trade unions representing the “working class” (Atkinson 2015:72).

Such cognitive foundations for the classification of people around us (and for ourselves) implies that the perceived orchestrations of socio-economic classes are situated, fluid, and malleable. As cultural models, these classification principles become etched into our everyday practices as much as they are structured by our institutional surroundings. At the same time, the economic and symbolic definitions we give to class and status help us to reify them as concepts we can see, feel, and measure in practice. In doing so, we navigate the world in our everyday lives and position ourselves in relation to others in the different social spaces we occupy.

Bourdieu’s approach to status and class is more fluid and less categorical than the above-described Weberian model. Yet, I ask – does it correspond to the models that people use in their implicit allusions to class and status as they narrate and describe their social surroundings? As I look at some of my interview transcriptions or my informants’ comments I wrote down during my fieldwork, I discover remarks such as “I think he has the status of wealthy people” (*tiene el estatus de ser de gente de plata*), which indicates a corresponding meaning between status and class. Yet often enough, there is either a nuanced or less nuanced differentiation between the two. As I mention above, a comment that establishes a contrast between being poor and *yet* being entrepreneurial contains a reference to one’s socioeconomic class (poor) and a less direct reference to status (entrepreneurial). An understanding of class in such remarks reveals itself to be more objective and economically defined. Status, on the other hand, conceals ideas of social

acceptance (or not), respect (or not), and an indication to what one *does* or *how* one is. In that sense, my research challenges the Bordieuan interpretation of class as synonymous to status. Yet neither does it support a categorical distinction between them.

As the following chapters show, being an entrepreneur does not necessarily imply that one automatically forms part of a given class (such as the middle class). But it does provide one with widely accepted and even applauded social status. Even if by some objective measures my informants belong to the middle-class, they still describe themselves as “entrepreneurs,” “economically progressive,” or “self-employed.” Such a way to define oneself, which circumvents class-related designators, is logical given how the privileging of middle-classness is so tightly linked to perceptions and representations of race; particularly to being white. As mixed-race, my informants are left out of the national imaginaries of what being middle-class means. Thus, by capitalizing on opportunities to elevate their social status, they are able to bypass those rigid imaginaries while still becoming socioeconomically mobile. For many, this implies achieving a position in their social space that allows them to consider their lifestyle akin to middle-classness, whether for their income or the property they own, their models of consumption, etc. Thus, the separation of status from class has heuristic value for analyzing the relationship between ‘objective’ (economic) class, perceptions of race, and practices that define one’s place in one’s surrounding social world. But the borders between understandings of status and class collapse as having a certain status becomes simply an easier way (for criollos) to articulate their aspiration to belong or their belonging to a certain socioeconomic class. Considering the flexible and situated relationship between status and class, as an alternative to the class-status debated, I propose that the two follow a DNA-like sequence: they coil around

each other as if in a dance, constantly interacting with each other and shaping one's subjectivity while also guiding others' perceptions of us.

## **II: Social space and *capital***

“[The social] space,” Bourdieu writes, “is constructed in such a way that the closer the agents, groups or institutions which are situated within this space, the more common properties they have; and the more distant, the fewer” (1989:19). These common properties imply a similar possession and overall volume of capital, be it economic, cultural, or social. And as forms of power, the different capitals determine people's social position (Wacquant 1991:52). But while people's level of capital may be similar, their composition may differ. It is one thing to be a wealthy business owner who never went to school and has yet made millions with an enterprise she has started from zero. While her material means may allocate her in the upper-class categories, her inter-generational cultural inheritance –or the lack thereof– places her in the category of the nouveau riche. It is another thing to be a wealthy ‘old money’ aristocrat with a family pedigree of five generations of elite university graduates. The symbolic value inherent in the family endowment of education and social networks evidences the importance of cultural capital in the intra-class hierarchies. In other words, high volume of economic capital with little cultural capital differentiates one from those who have the same volume of economic capital and also a wealth of cultural capital (e.g. educational achievements). These variations between the makeup of different groups' capital mark one's class habitus and defines her shifting position in the social space. Bourdieu also discussed the concept of symbolic capital at great length in his work. In his view, social and cultural capital in themselves form symbolic capital which translates to, for example, status markers, prestige or authority. Symbolic capital stands in

contrast to economic capital, which is a more objective, quantifiable measure for one's class position.<sup>41</sup>

The social space fosters internal struggles over power and privilege. As Bourdieu shows in *Distinction* (2010), different social spaces are like battle grounds where the agents engage in aspirational struggles over authority and influence, thereby marking their intra-field territories. Shaped by the social structures that define their class habitus while simultaneously structuring those very same (social, institutional) structures, the agents in the social field continuously navigate in a mini-universe of symbolic representations, practices, and dispositions that define who they are and what they want to be. Thus, habitus could be understood as the locus of one's internal *and* external behaviors, and also the internalized conceptions of the world that mark and defend one's place in a social field or sustain the drive to move away (or upwards) from it. These behaviors, in turn, reflect in the conflicts and contestations whereby the agents' accrual of capitals is the principal stake in the making and unmaking of power relations.

Social mobility may not always be the same as economically measurable class mobility but can come in tandem with an elevated social status. Even if one's economic capital is not increasing, her athletic or educational success may help her gain status within her surrounding community. In such cases, the experience of social mobility occurs outside the framings of an economic class bracket. In the next chapter I analyze physical and social capital and their convertibility into status currency through the meanings of being a triathlete. The fourth chapter focuses on social and economic capital and how they are accrued through entrepreneurship in the context of a cooperative. In the fifth chapter, I examine the role of cultural capital among first

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<sup>41</sup> In social science research following Bourdieu, the idea of capitals has been extended to a number of directions, from "physical/corporeal capital" (e.g. Wacquant 1995) to "sporting capital" (Stempel 2005) and "existentialist capital" (Nettleton 2013), to mention but a few.

generation criollo university students, and how being in the university reflects their sense of self and future aspirations. The concept of capitals –how they are acquired, exchanged and converted into status currency– thus works as the principal tool I use to unpack and analyze my research data. In the following, I will define their meaning and discuss their roles as lenses to examine socioeconomic transformations.

### **Social capital**

Bourdieu defines social capital as “the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network...or to membership in a group. [This] provides each of its members with the backing of the collectivity-owned capital, a “credential” which entitles them to credit in the various senses of the word” (1986:51). In other words, he links the possession of social capital with the individual’s place vis-à-vis other agents, whether in shared or separate social spaces. As such, social capital functions as an integral element of one’s class position, which links to her status within her surrounding community. Crucially, while it comprises the networks one establishes in her vicinity –in physical and geographical, as well as economic or occupational sense–, it also indicates processes of social mobility “based on the conversion of one form of capital into another” (Coulageon & Duval 2015:7). This capital conversion constitutes the transversal axis in the social space, indicating the agent’s socioeconomic trajectory and operating as fluid status currency. As a measure of class position, the volume of one’s social capital reflects the economic and cultural capital possessed by those who are part of one’s social habitat. Moreover, as one mobilizes her social networks in pursuit of individual or collective benefit, one turns social capital into currency that not only reaffirms her status and class location but may also open doors to move upwards from that location.

Robert Putnam writes about social capital from a slightly different perspective. Rather than conceiving of it in terms of class, Putnam refers to it as “features of social organization such as networks, norms, and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit” (Putnam 1995: 2). Social capital is a measure of a society’s civic wellbeing, and its volume commensurable with the levels of citizen participation in volunteer associations, church groups or, say, sport clubs.<sup>42</sup> Seen this way, social capital works as a kind of adhesive material that keeps societies together from within rather than as a measure of the agent’s status and a yardstick of her socioeconomic trajectory.<sup>43</sup> That said, differences between Bourdieu’s and Putnam’s work do not make them mutually exclusive or antagonistic. To consider social capital relevant to both status and class position and to relationships of trust and cooperation as a measure of social cohesion, offers a wider perspective to analyzing class membership. It makes it possible to examine inter- and intra-class dynamics by acknowledging their power relations without necessarily thinking about them only through conflict. This reflects especially in two of my ethnographic sites: the Ironsport triathlon team and the women’s cooperative, *la Cooperativa Integral*. In both places, the acquisition of social capital is rooted in relationships of collaboration and trust. These relationships empower as much the young *becarios* (sponsored athletes) as the workers in the cooperative. However, membership in the same group and the networks the group provides is also, precisely, the kind of material that aspirants to upward mobility need in order to move on from the class bracket they occupy. Social capital could therefore be seen as negotiation

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<sup>42</sup> Putnam argues that social capital in the United States has been steadily dwindling throughout the post-war era. Using bowling clubs as an example, he shows how since the 1960s the number of clubs has decreased dramatically while the number of bowlers (those who go to bowling centers without institutional affiliation/membership) has increased. This, Putnam suggests, serves as an analogy of what a decrease in social capital means.

<sup>43</sup> The lack of recognition of how social capital generates social struggle and reproduces class positions is also a point of critique against Putnam’s work. He does not seem to take into account how clubs and associations may be born out of *resistance* to dominating political forces, or how these groups may flourish precisely because of their mutual conflict. In other words, social capital in Putnam’s work does not acknowledge how trust and mistrust, cooperation and competition, or aid and conflict in civic life exist always in a dialogue (cf. Siisiäinen 2000).

power that, on the basis of cooperative relationships, turns into an empowering tool in social ascent.

### **Cultural capital**

Following Bourdieu, I refer to cultural capital as the highly esteemed codes of conduct, cultural consumption models, and sense of aesthetics, as well as linguistic competence and knowledge transmitted through family life and educational institutions. In Bourdieu's class analysis, cultural capital forms the axis in the social space that stands perpendicular to that of economic capital, and whose composition marks one dimension of one's class habitus. The operational force of cultural capital is channeled through, for instance, middle- or upper-class cultural preferences (e.g. certain type of music, arts, or sports) bequeathed from one generation to another and is institutionalized through education. It also represents the yield of diverse investments, whether economic, symbolic, or temporal, that reproduce and further hierarchizes class membership in the social space. "Cultural capital," Bourdieu writes, "can exist in three forms:"

In the embodied state, i.e., in the form of long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body; in the objectified state, in the form of cultural goods (pictures, books, dictionaries, instruments, machines, etc.), which are the trace or realization of theories or critiques of these theories, problematics, etc.; and in the institutionalized state, a form of objectification which must be set apart because, as will be seen in the case of educational qualifications, it confers entirely original properties on the cultural capital which it is presumed to guarantee (1986:47).

The role of educational institutions in the generation of cultural capital is primarily supportive and cannot be counted on as a singular, extra-familial source for knowledge production. What schools do is that they concretize the inherited knowledge and expressional abilities by way of educational achievements, thereby producing verified and legitimized competence. The field of



education in terms of the reproduction of social classes, is highly contested and somewhat polarized. One camp of social scientists argues that state schools (especially in Europe) have succeeded in erasing the educational performance gaps between students from different socioeconomic backgrounds.<sup>44</sup> At the same time, many scholars argue that schools and universities serve simply as institutionalized sites for the reproduction of class and as a centrifuge for social inequalities (Bourdieu & Passeron 1990, Lareau & Weininger 2003, Reay 2004; Stahl 2015, Tzanakis 2011).

Bourdieu's approach to cultural capital is problematic in how it operates in practice today. He writes about cultural capital mainly in relation to French bourgeoisie, whose cultural values, he argues, have become the hegemonic standard for judgement and taste (in the 1970s France). *Distinction* (2010) describes how middle- and upper-class manners, behaviors and tastes become the yardstick for valorizing legitimate cultural participation writ large. High-brow culture, which Bourdieu studied especially through taste for music and arts, represents membership in the upper echelons of the society and the ultimate frontier of distinction between the sophisticated and the vulgar. Today's scholarship, however, argues that such stark inter-class divisions and homologies between class and cultural capital are outdated and, at best, limited to very specific contexts. Hierarchies of taste can be masked by different sociocultural or racial contexts and vary among different gender, ethnic or age groups and, moreover, may easily migrate across class boundaries (Gartman 1991). It is fair to question, for example, if listening to classical or contemporary opera is really a stronger indication of a wealth of cultural capital than, say, having a gamut of musical preferences ranging from jazz to bluegrass to rap. Especially

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<sup>44</sup> An example of this is the Education Reform Act in the United Kingdom in 1988, which established a national curriculum that all state schools should follow. Among other aims, it was set to improve students' school attendance across the socioeconomic spectrum and facilitate less privileged students' access to secondary and higher education.

among younger generations, cultural consumption choices may in fact directly challenge the homology of taste and class proposed by Bourdieu. Prieur and Savage (2013) show how the correlation between upper-class and high-brow culture has gradually become undone among young Danes and Britons. Instead, these youngsters value the knowledge and consumption of a wider range of cultural practices and goods over traditional forms of high culture. This harks back to Peterson and Simkus's "omnivore vs. univore" thesis from the early 1990s, which has subsequently been tested by other scholars, such as Jordi López-Sintas and Ercilia García-Alvarez in Spain (2002), and Eric Bihagen and Tall Gatz-Gerro in Sweden (2003). In these cases, the authors conclude that a so-called snob cultural consumption no longer defines middle- and upper-middle classes' cultural tastes and values. Instead, what Michael Emmison (2003) calls "cultural mobility," i.e. the ability to move freely between realms of high-brow arts and popular culture, is much more adequate as a marker of the volume of one's cultural capital. Especially for the younger generation, as Prieur and Savage show, street credibility stems from embracing cosmopolitan models of cultural practices and the consumption of diverse forms of popular culture which are readily accessible through myriad information technologies. Categories of taste, in that sense, show their fluidity as, say, aesthetic and musical preferences or culinary choices diversify, intersect and coalesce. That does not mean that cultural capital in itself would lose its relevance. Instead, how it is mobilized and through what channels becomes as important as what that capital consists of (Heikkila & Rahkonen 2011; Prieur & Savage 2013).

From today's scholarly perspective, Bourdieu's oeuvre lacks deeper analysis on race, ethnicity, or gender in relation to cultural capital and class. For example, Tara Yosso (2006) points out how traditional interpretations of cultural capital presuppose that knowledge systems, behavior codes, or tastes among people of color are by default less worthy than the (middle-

class) models of ‘legitimate’ forms of knowledge. Framing class identities on the basis of different capitals –especially cultural capital– do, of course, underpin how people situate themselves vis-à-vis others. It is precisely because of this rather than despite it, that it is necessary to amplify the scope of approaches to class and incorporate variables such as race, gender, and relations of affect into the analysis.<sup>45</sup> Scholars of education have been on the forefront of this and examined the production and acquisition of cultural capital among students across school stages. As I discuss in chapter five, evidence across different geographical contexts shows that a family history of higher degree of cultural and/or economic capital tends to lead to educational advantage over those who do not have such a family background. Reay et al. (2001), for example, study the effectiveness of state-instituted higher education campaigns of diversity and inclusion in relation to students of color and those from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds. They ask whether the campaigns really further minority students’ chances to access higher education and, moreover, choose their career paths as freely as their middle-class, white peers. Their answer is no. Studies on minorities and education largely agree on the correlation between lower school performance and membership to working class and minority groups, especially since in sociological analyses the two groups seem to conflate. Similarly, on this side of the Atlantic, Won-Pyo Hong and Peter Youngs (2008) ask if high-stakes testing practices in elementary and secondary schools increase cultural capital –general knowledge and the capacity to apply it– among low-income and racial minority students in the United States. Contrary to the ‘good intentions’ of the state-implemented schooling programs, the authors conclude that they do not have significant effect on the students’ college admissions of adult

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<sup>45</sup> It is fair, though, to acknowledge that Bourdieu’s understanding of cultural capital was not just a theoretical concept, but he also proposed it to be a kind of *tool to think with*. That would free it from its abstract confines and release its power in relation to grounded research methodologies.

employment opportunities. In other words, minority students' chances of obtaining and success rates in higher education continue to be inferior than among white middle-class students. Thus, despite the critique against Bourdieu's lack of attention to minorities, his and Passeron's theory of social reproduction –that the volume of cultural capital mediated by educational institutions perpetuate class inequalities– continues to influence research on class, race, and education.

More directly related to class structures, Diane Reay demonstrates how in the United Kingdom, contrary to the School Reform Act's aims, the reforms in state schools over the last twenty years have turned out to exacerbate class differences. Rather than retaining middle-class children in state schools and promoting inclusion through encouraging parental involvement, these reforms reveal the differences in school performance that correlate with socioeconomic class differences. What ensues is (the unfortunate) highlighting of class structures within the free educational system claims to offer equal educational opportunities for everybody (Reay, 2010). This also applies to Santiago, where those with a stable economic position and (often) private education background are the most successful in higher education.<sup>46</sup> While recognizing the mechanisms of reproduction within higher education, my research also shows how the acquisition of cultural capital within a university context can empower mixed-race students. I do not aim at refuting existing empirical evidence on the perpetuation of class differences, and minority groups' exclusion in different educational stages. Rather, my case studies point to the micro processes within a wider context of sociocultural inequality that show how agency and empowerment through the acquisition of cultural capital unfolds in practice. This reflects the

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<sup>46</sup> I do not have statistical information on this; such statistics could only be done through comparing elementary school background with graduation rate from the university. To my knowledge, such studies have not been performed in Santiago. Instead, my information comes directly from professors in the UNSE, who have first-hand information and understanding of where their students come from. According to my colleagues, there is also a strong correlation between being from the city of Santiago and good school performance, and having origins in the interior of the province and dropping out of the university prior to graduation.

ways criollos begin to identify themselves as citizens with chances to become e.g. politically active or culturally productive (i.e. through interest in the local history or celebration of interculturality) besides enhancing their position in the labor market. In other words, education harbors the potential to empower mixed-raced students in terms of their cultural, social, and also economic capital. I recognize that this is hardly a novel thesis. What I show is that the case of criollo students' strengthened sense of self and agency, and the accrual of cultural capital offers yet another angle on examining processes of socioeconomic mobility among a racially *othered* group.

### **III: Aspirational social mobility and the quest to middle-classness**

The concept of the middle class is far from straight-forward, despite its weight and significance in public discourse across different geographical and political contexts. According to the World Bank, a *global* middle-class income is 10-50 dollars per day. But how telling is this income bracket, arbitrary and essentializing at best, of the ways in which people perceive the middle classes or how they experience middle-classness? What does it say about the social meanings of being middle-class? Not much. From an anthropological perspective, the middle class is a social category whose boundaries are porous and constantly negotiated. It may have measurable and structured moorings when understood in economic terms, as defined by the World Bank. But as a social scientific concept, its definition is much more equivocal.

In my research, I approach middle-classness as a social identity that rests on aspiration and moves historically over time (Wacquant 1991). Following Bourdieu's argument of class as a relational concept, I focus on how the acquisition and possession of economic, cultural, and social capital guide the ways in which people position themselves vis-à-vis shifting class lines; that is, how they carve out their space in the different social fields they occupy. These capitals, as

mentioned above, speak to one's educational level, professional occupation, social networks including kin and friends, cultural participation, consumption practices, personal taste and style, etc. The theory (and practice) of different capitals is not tied to the study of the middle-classes alone. In my research, however, I apply these concepts exclusively in the study of social mobility and also to highlight people's imaginaries of what living a middle-class lifestyle means. That said, as much as the middle class may rest on material and symbolic markers related to lifestyles or on the appropriation of certain cultural models of class behavior, it remains a troublesome group to study. The middle classes are as ambiguous as they are dynamic; they resist reification (Wacquant 1991).

How, then, have social scientists approached the middle class as a scholarly subject? The myriad research angles that scholars have embraced in their analyses range from questions of values and moralities (Fava & Zenobi 2009; Owensby 2001; Watenpaugh 2012) and modes of consumption (Boos 2017; O'Dougherty 2002; Colloredo-Mansfeld 1999; Oliven 2012) to political ideologies (DeRiz 2009; Carassai 2014; Fernandes 2004) and the relationship between race and middle-classness (Garguín 2007, Joseph 2000, Pattillo 1999; 2005). In many parts of the worlds, to be middle-class implies having a social identity that is rooted in desires for stability and growth, and in the straddling between being part of a hegemonic social, political, and economic force while also striving for distinction within it (Bourdieu 2010; Freeman 2014; O'Dougherty 2002; Svampa 2001). At the same time, the desires for stability and growth conceal a "fear of falling;" that is, the fear of losing the position one has acquired in the middle sector of the socioeconomic spectrum. Perhaps the most vulnerable group in that sense are those whose socioeconomic ascent is relatively new (i.e. achieved within one generation), and whose middle-class status is not yet consolidated within the society as a whole (Minujin & Kessler 1995). As

Katherine Newman discusses in the context of the 1980s United States, class descent has a particularly destabilizing effect on the middle-class subjectivities. What she calls the “fall from grace” implies not only losing economic capital, but also status. And it is precisely the loss of status that implies sensations of shame and demands strategies to hide it (1988).

In the United States, Bradd Shore (2003) argues, the idea of the middle class rests on the assumption of “intergenerational discontinuity.” Within the ideologies of middle-classness, generations are expected to aspire for and achieve more than the previous ones and thus break self-repeating cycles of poverty, blue-collard-ness, etc. What this imposes on those aspiring to be socially mobile is the imperative “to see one’s life as a self-conscious upward climb” (2003:9). In today’s sense of class mobility, an upward climb is a process of accruing lifestyle experiences that not only fit global criteria of cosmopolitanism, e.g. fashion, vacation travels, leisure activities. They must also be translatable into shared vocabularies and narratives (Visacovsky 2010; 2014) that the members of the middle classes can collectively understand. The intergenerational discontinuities therefore also imply the constant revisiting of what *really* speaks of social mobility (beyond economic capital). On other hand, the narratives of socioeconomic mobility and lifestyles categorized as middle-class conceal the ‘non-narrative’ of downward mobility. One of Katherine Newman’s arguments in *Falling from Grace* (1988) is that class descent becomes difficult to express not only because of the shame and feelings of failure embedded in it. It is difficult to express also because in the United States, there are no ready-made narrative models to articulate downward mobility – it simply does not fit in the national ethos of individual economic growth and the ‘become-your-own-boss’ mentality. Not only the fear of falling but also downward mobility in itself is erased from expressions of social wellbeing, thereby creating the illusion that the fall simply does not exist. This supports the

thesis that middle-classness is tightly linked with popular and public discourse and narrative models that frame the experience of socioeconomic mobility. At the same time, such narrative models leave out those who must conceal their loss of mortgage, job, stable income, health insurance, or children's private education (Minujin & Kessler 1995; Newman 1988; Visacovsky 2014).

As neoliberal ideologies have expanded across the world since the 1980s, social scientists and economists have analyzed the growth of the middle classes in relation to larger processes of globalization. In my dissertation, I turn the lens on how social mobility and self-identifying as middle-class is experienced among those considered as the “ethno-racial (or racialized) *other*” in localized contexts. Studies on race and ethnicity and the construction on ethno-racial identities have burgeoned over the last few decades especially in Latin America (Wade 2010). However, topics of race and ethnicity are still often framed through presuppositions of lower-class homogeneity and consequently, socioeconomic and cultural inequality. In order to continue discussing the relationship between middle-classness, social mobility, and race, it is necessary to first look at some of problematics regarding the meanings of race and ethnicity in Latin America.

#### **IV: Race, ethnicity, and the parameters of whiteness**

The question of race in Latin America carries within a weight of ‘whiteness,’ often juxtaposed with ‘blackness’ or ‘mestizo-ness.’ The point zero for analyzing local constructions of race is the frontier where the *other* is made visible through its difference from the hegemonic. What mediates imaginaries of race –i.e. color, phenotype, geographical origins– is the normalization of being white in a continent where those understood as white arrived only around 500 years ago. As Peter Wade (2010) writes, “the concept of race is...linked into a European



history of thinking about difference, rather than a concept describing an objective reality that is independent of a social context” (2010:14). At the same time, if recognized as historically contingent, conceptions of race –black, mixed-race, white, even indigenous– must also be understood as changing and situational social positionings. Their boundaries can be as arbitrary as the social connotations attached to the vocabularies of color that take their cue from perceived racial differences (Gordillo 2016). What delineate those boundaries are the shifting political, social, and even academic demands and paradigms. Thus, to analyze the complexities of racial constellations in Latin America necessitates an analysis of histories that have imbued those constellations with social and cultural meaning.

A similar approach applies to the question of ethnicity. A concept with porous and malleable borders, ethnicity can be understood as a shared belief system of a common ancestry or origins (Jenkins 2008), as a process of negotiations and differentiations between *us* and *them* (Barth 1969), or even as a category that as such has little purposes for analysis and if anything, should be understood not as a *thing in* the world, but a *perspective on* the world (Brubaker et al. 2004). Ethnicity, Rogers Brubaker and his colleagues argue, could in fact be understood as a kind of cognition; an experience and aspect of everyday life through people’s innate tendency to classify and categorize (Lakoff 1987 in Brubaker et al. 2004). This does not mean ethnicity, or race for that matter, would not be experiential realities. However, as Brubaker et al. implicitly suggest, what is experienced as a reality does not necessarily mean it is objectively speaking real:

Racial idioms, ideologies, narratives, categories, and systems of classification, and racialized ways of seeing, thinking, talking, and framing claims, are real and consequential, especially when they are embedded in powerful organizations. But the reality of race -and even its overwhelming coercive power in some settings- does not depend on the existence of "races." Similarly, the reality of ethnicity and nationhood-and the overriding power of ethnic and national identifications in some settings-does not depend on the existence of ethnic groups or nations as substantial groups or entities (2004: 12-13).

Brubaker's ontological approach to ethnicity and race may lead to a slippery terrain. In that terrain, reality divorces from the *real* and race and ethnicity become as elusive and mutable as the above-discussed concept of the middle class. And still, just as with the concept of the middle class, imaginaries of race and ethnicity translate into lived realities all the time. They convert into shared categories and continue to structure social (and economic) hierarchies.

What does all this have to do with the convoluted ethno-racial relations in Argentina?

The problem here is not so much about the meanings of race or ethnicity. Rather, it is about how the two coalesce and metamorphose into complicated, malleable categories implying phenotype, cultural customs, skin color, social behavior and class all at once. Histories of immigration in the Southern Cone and Brazil illustrate this particularly well. The diverse immigrant populations that arrived there in the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, were quickly given ethnic and national labels that may have had little to do with how the newcomers perceived themselves as. For example, Jews fleeing the late 19<sup>th</sup> century pogroms in Eastern Europe and Russia became *rusos* (Russian), Syrians and Lebanese became *turcos* (Turkish), Ukrainians became *polacos* (Polish), and sometimes like Jews from Eastern Europe, both Ukrainians and Polish became *rusos*, too. Back then, race was still largely understood as a biological fact; a belief exploited by many Latin American leaders as they endeavored to homogenize the racial makeup of the countries' populations to assert the cultural superiority of the white European immigrants.<sup>47</sup> However, in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century these assumptions began to change. Jerry Dávila

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<sup>47</sup> The Argentine *Conquista del Desierto* ("the Conquest of the Desert") is among the most notorious examples of such homogenization efforts. In 1878, the then minister of war (subsequently the president), Julio Roca, initiated a military campaign with the purpose to counter the "indigenous menace," whether by "extinguishing them or throwing them onto the other side of the Rio Negro" (Roca 1875, cited in Walther, 1970). The genocidal campaign was founded on a rhetoric that the indigenous people representing a danger to the society for their bellicose and unruly behavior. Yet the undergirding motives were as much about eradicating the inconvenient *other* from the way of the gradually arriving and growing population of European descendants (Briones & Delrio 2007).

analyzes this shift in *Diploma of Whiteness* (2003). He shows how the Brazilian school system began to target the Afro-Brazilian population with the effort to educate them and thus make them ‘culturally whiter.’ Jeffrey Lesser (1999) makes a similar point as he discusses the making of Brazilian immigrant (or immigrant-Brazilian) identities and the construction of ‘Brazilian-ness.’ Those deemed non-white (non-Western and Southern Europeans) were able to become ‘ethnically white’ by, for instance, forsaking their ethno-national identities, whether Arab or Asian, and embracing the nationalist rhetoric of Brazilian-ness with all its cultural implications. Similar processes took place in Argentina. In public discourse, the growing arrival of immigrants from the late 19<sup>th</sup> until the early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries made Argentina *un crisol de razas* – a racial melting pot. What supposedly came out of that melting pot, was the *raza argentina* – the Argentine race. Yet far from truly being a mixture of races fresh from the melting pot, the idea of the Argentine race was simply a metonym for the “white race” (Adamovsky 2012). In this process, the parameters of whiteness also changed, and came to be as much about cultural behaviors as about blue eyes and blond hair. Like in Brazil, immigrants from outside Western and Southern Europe worked to ascend the socioeconomic ladder, thereby making themselves ‘whiter.’ In other words, whiteness began to fuse with labels of ethnicity: Jewishness, for instance, or Eastern-European-ness, could (potentially) become conflated with whiteness.<sup>48</sup>

As I discuss in the previous chapter, the efforts to whiten the nation excluded the native populations, who, since the colonization, had been deemed racially, culturally, and also cognitively inferior. They had no place in the construction of the modern Argentina and were

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<sup>48</sup> This was not, however, always the case. As the historian Raanan Rein shows in his book *Los Bohemios de Villa Crespo. Judíos y Fútbol en la Argentina* (2012), there were also stark, quasi-tribal rivalries among different ethno-racial immigrant groups. He describes these rivalries through soccer and how the sport marked the making of certain neighborhoods in Buenos Aires. In doing so, he lays out the axis of class and ethnicity-race along which urban spaces and understandings of what Argentina was were established. While Rein focuses on the Jewish immigration and their history in a particular neighborhood in Buenos Aires, he also shows how the processes of assimilation were much more complex than simply a unilateral ‘race towards whiteness.’

considered an obstacle in the country's endeavors to modernize, civilize, and whiten itself. In that sense, processes of miscegenation –what presumably the Argentine racial melting pot was all about– did not form part of the making of the “Argentine (white) race.”<sup>49</sup> On the contrary, what was in the making was an ethno-racial classification that became associated with a barbaric, backward culture: *negros* and *criollos* were gradually confined into a rank on the bottom of Argentine socioeconomic hierarchies. Furthermore, in this dissertation I suggest that by falling outside the racial parameters of the project of nation building in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, subsequently the racialized *other* also fell outside the generally understood framework of legitimate citizenry. From the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century onwards, that framework of legitimacy grew to be determined by class. The middle-class was rapidly growing and increasingly defining the shape of the modernizing Argentina. But as I describe in the previous chapter, the making of the Argentine middle classes was not only about economic growth. It was also about the parallelly evolving middle-class identities that came into being on the basis of what they were *not* – i.e. the racialized *other* known as *negros*, *criollos*, *cabecita negras*, etc. (Aguiló 2018; Chamosa 2008). At that point, at the latest, ethno-racial categories collapsed together with imaginaries of class, and labels such as white, black, mestizo, etc. came to connote one's class position as much as one's skin color, facial features, level of cultural capital, and geographic origins and ancestry.

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<sup>49</sup> There is surprisingly little literature on intermarriage in Argentina, although it is acknowledged that it was common especially among Western and Southern European immigrants. The information I have on intermarriage between indigenous, criollos, and European and Arab immigrants is anecdotal and gathered through my informants' narratives. During the Great Migration period, intermarriages took place, but I heard from many Santiagueños that they were neither common nor socially acceptable. Among my informants, there were adventurous stories about how an Italian great-grandmother had had to escape with her criollo partner (the great-grandfather) and become disowned by her family for being with a criollo man. Intermarriage between European men and local criollo women seems to have been much more acceptable than vice versa, echoing the colonial histories of ‘illegitimate’ miscegenation.

## V: Race to socioeconomic mobility

Academic research on the intersectionality between race and middle-classness is steadily increasing, following a trend first set in the United States. Historically that relationship has manifested especially in changes of neighborhood divisions (Kruse 2013; Lacy 2007; Pattillo 2005). Kevin Kruse's work on the urban history of Atlanta and how it has been drawn along racial lines is a case in point (2013). Kruse shows how the racial divisions and conflicts manifested principally in the whites' battle over the space they felt they were losing as increasing numbers of African Americans from the rural south arrived in the city. Challenging Atlanta's reputation as a city freed from racial discrimination, he discusses how the very discrimination generated spaces of different class and buttressed the making of both black and white middle classes. Yet it encompasses a brokering between white and black models of family structure, appropriation of certain popular culture as emblematic of 'blackness,' racism and segregation, and also highlighting blackness as an identity that middle-class membership helps to mobilize (Boyd 1997; Lacy 2007; Pattillo 1999, 2005).<sup>50</sup> Rudi Colloredo-Mansfeld's research on indigenous people's ascent to "leisure class" status in Peru (1999) serves as another example, from the Latin American perspective. His work shows how indigenous entrepreneurs in the local tourism industry turn their indigenusness into coveted currency in the local (and global) markets of consumerism. Globalizing patterns of consumption among the indigenous, in turn, problematize the local racial and social hierarchies established on the basis of *who* is entitled to

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<sup>50</sup> Mary Pattillo (2005) studies Black middle-class neighborhoods in terms of desires for and realities of integration and segregation. She shows how the disposition towards living in neighborhoods of "50-50 black and white" is greater among the black population than among whites. Whites, as she says, "stick to their guns" (2005: 323), being much less inclined to live among blacks. The argument she makes is in reverse to other scholarship on the black middle classes for she suggests that in order to understand black communities' residential choices, it might be useful to start by examining how whites still draw the lines that demarcate different residential areas.

access *what*. The economic growth that ensues from capitalizing on indigenusness introduces profound changes in local consumption practices, thereby also changing how the indigenous position themselves in the social field of class and ethno-racial relations and vis-à-vis globally understood markers of middle-classness.

Following Colloredo-Mansfeld, research on similar issues has begun to emerge in other Latin American contexts, expanding the question of ethnicity to that of race, too. Angela Figueiredo (2004), for example, writes about the socioeconomic ascent among afro-Brazilians in Salvador, Brazil, and the diverse forms of racism they still encounter as middle-class citizens. Without long-standing social and cultural capital to fall back onto, black Brazilians' upward mobility hinges almost exclusively on their individual efforts. What ensues is uncertainty and class vulnerability that the black people who consider themselves middle-class correlate with the country's deep undercurrents of racial inequality. Becoming socially mobile, Figueiredo argues, in fact enhances people's consciousness of the ethno-racial hierarchies they are surrounded by. Taking their cue from Figueiredo's early work, Dias de Catro et al. (2017) focus on black middle-class women's university trajectories in Belo Horizonte. While they, too, recognize the racial (and gendered) consciousness among their subjects of research, the authors mostly pay attention to the mechanisms by which the women are able to overcome barriers to social ascent. Empowered by their level of education, the women start to challenge the prevalent racial and patriarchal structures that demand 'whiteness' for one to be considered middle-class.

These selected examples portray some of the research angles on the relationship between ethnicity, race and class, that scholars in and of Latin America have begun to embrace over the last decade. In Argentina, social scientists have adopted similar perspectives, focusing especially on the historical link between whiteness and the meanings of being middle-class (Chamosa 2010,

2008; Cosse 2014). Enrique Garguín (2007), for example, shows how the moorings of middle-classness in Argentina are linked to the myth that “Argentines were born in the ships.” As I discuss in the previous chapter, by encouraging immigration from European countries since the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Argentine state implemented concrete measures to ‘whiten’ the nation. Gradually the country’s ethno-racial makeup converted into binaries of center/periphery, civilization/barbarity; white/ mixed-race; etc. That way imaginaries of Argentine-ness came to imply social hierarchies whereby those of European descent were directly entitled to socioeconomic privilege. Such ideologies of middle-classness still underpin the everyday realities in Argentina. Galen Joseph (2000) demonstrates how whiteness is an important component of Argentine national identity (among middle-class Porteños) that crystallizes as a form of cultural capital.<sup>51</sup> This capital, in turn, manifests in understandings of concepts such as ‘development,’ ‘democracy,’ and ‘political seriousness,’ in which the vestiges of nation-building on the basis of race continue their existence. In a similar vein, Emanuela Guano (2003) contrasts the historical argument of the correlation between middle-classness and whiteness against post- 2001-02 crisis Buenos Aires. She discusses how people who self-identify as middle-class and yet were impoverished by the crisis use their European roots as a justification for their middle-class position. Sergio Visacovsky (2014) elaborates this argument by showing how Porteños’ identity as middle-class Argentines resides in inter-generational narratives of their immigrant origins. The force these narratives carry evokes shared meanings of

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<sup>51</sup> The centrality of whiteness in Argentine national identity is not generalizable to the rest of Latin America. For instance, in Mexico, the nationalist rhetoric in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century centered around racial and ethnic mixing. Christina Sue (2014) discusses the role of *mestizaje* in Mexico, and the rhetoric of *mestizaje* in the post-revolution nation-building. While she argues that Mexico is a highly racialized and racially hierarchical society, she points out to how the public discourse on *mestizaje* was elemental in creating an idea of a racially mixed and thus ‘equal’ and unified Mexico where the history of colonization was seamlessly woven into the idea of the birth of modern Mexico as a country of *mestizos*. In a similar vein, Marisol de la Cadena discusses the building of Peru’s national identity around questions of indigeneity (2000), while Daniel Bauer (2010) shows how in Ecuador, the ‘re-indigenizing’ of some of its regions has begun to claim its voice also in wider national identity politics.

middle-classness, even if in more objective terms one could no longer be qualified as a member of an economic or occupational middle class (e.g. when one's salary has been reduced or she has been made unemployed).

The binding factor between Argentine research on race, middle class, and socioeconomic mobility together is their geographic focus on Buenos Aires and the surrounding Pampas region. In other words, race and class relations elsewhere in the country have been left largely unstudied.<sup>52</sup> Race evidently has seeped into research on the middle classes, as the above-mentioned examples demonstrate. Yet that research mostly problematizes the relationship between middle-classness and whiteness, sidelining inquiries on how those who do not consider themselves white might experience socioeconomic mobility. My research aims to extend the frontiers of this field by analyzing how mixed-race Argentines beyond the geographical perimeters of Buenos Aires (and the 'privilege' of whiteness) experience social mobility. This dissertation does not only aim at expanding the topical scope of middle class-related research; it also offers alternative perspectives to thinking about Argentine myths and imaginaries of class mobility, middle-classness, and their racialized foundations.

## **VI: Entrepreneurialism and the neoliberal way of the world**

The acquisition and accumulation of different capitals may potentiate social mobility. This dissertation shows that one way for criollos to acquire different capitals is through entrepreneurialism. Both a business practice (entrepreneurship) and a kind of mentality or an outlook to the world, entrepreneurialism carries within it a sense of social legitimacy while

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<sup>52</sup> There are exceptions to this. Alejandro Grimson's work (2011) on oil industry workers in the Southern city of Comodoro Rivadavia is a case in point. He discusses the economic ascent that northern dark-skinned temporal workers achieve upon joining the oil industry in the South. What ensues are destabilized class-race relations in the south where the majority of the population is white.



attracting popular acceptance. In writing about meanings of middle-classness and relations of affect, economy, and culture in Barbados, Carla Freeman argues that entrepreneurialism “connects market practices with self-making and is predicated upon porous boundaries of public and private life” (2014:1). In contrast to entrepreneurialism, entrepreneurship implies a more straight-forward practice of seeking profit through “doing business.” Throughout this dissertation, I use the term entrepreneurialism, referring to it as a set of dispositions and attitudes, as well business-oriented activities. Thus, I follow Freeman’s entrepreneurialism/entrepreneurship distinction –also made by other scholars such as Christian Laval and Pierre Dardot (2013) or Ulrich Bröckling (2016)– as I discuss my informants’ practices, everyday experiences, and future projections.

Ideologies of 21<sup>st</sup> century entrepreneurialism portray the figure of an entrepreneur as the principal agent of societal change and progress (Natanson 2016). Innovative, dynamic, and daring, the entrepreneur is no longer a mere business owner but a socially engaged individual who plays an important role in economic growth and reduction of poverty (Adamovsky 2017; Amorós & Cristi 2010; Lee 2017). Being an entrepreneur in Latin America, as Francesca Castellani and Eduardo Lora (2013) argue, is intimately linked to socioeconomic mobility. Start-ups in the region, just as elsewhere in the world, push young people towards upward mobility that otherwise they might only be able to dream of. But while enthusiastic start-up owners provide new, innovative technologies for the world as much as for self-improvement, the widely shared and expanding understandings of entrepreneurialism also speak of more nuanced changes in what it means to ‘be one’s own boss.’ Today’s ‘one’s own boss’ also recognizes her place in a constantly changing social world. As scholars on entrepreneurship have argued, contemporary entrepreneurs rely much more on social networks than, say, three decades ago, and are conscious

of the benefits of cooperation and social inclusion (Cardelli 2017; Lee 2017; Nijkamp 2003). Further, they are internet-savvy and thus perceptible to global trends. This savviness and (virtual) cosmopolitanism are transformed into innovative capital that aims to have a positive effect on their surrounding economic environment (Andersen 2008; Lee 2017).

The growth of entrepreneurship in Latin America is attributable, among other things, to the general –albeit often slow– economic growth in the region (Castellani & Lora 2014), and also private and state-led efforts (loans, incentives, educational opportunities) to spur the economy through entrepreneurship. As the economist Andres Solimano (2013) points out, the majority of entrepreneurs in the region tend to come from (economically defined) middle classes who have been able to benefit from the improving economic conditions in the region. However, he also acknowledges that:

In Latin America, “necessity entrepreneurship” is widespread. People who cannot find a job as an employee or worker in the formal sector of the economy choose to engage in independent “entrepreneurial” activities as a strategy of economic survival rather than as a rational choice among alternative occupations. These people often come from the lower segments of the middle class; many others are poor. They often operate in a context of informality (2013:26).

This certainly applies to Santiago, where informal entrepreneurship is an everyday visible reality: vendors of all sorts occupy street corners; selling and buying clothes or other goods through Facebook is common, and self-proclaimed experts, whether in informatics or electronic repairs, are hired through word-of-mouth. Yet, while Solano’s observations may be true, they do not convey how entrepreneurialism has also become a kind of moral path towards socioeconomic mobility for people from lower classes. To be entrepreneurial implies an attitude and characteristics that are not only socially accepted but also encouraged. The way political and public discourses disseminate the term ‘entrepreneur/ial’ echoes in how the term has permeated everyday vocabularies. Sabrina Cabaña (2017) discusses how Argentina’s current (neoliberal)

government mobilizes its “entrepreneurial discourse” as a strategy to spread its ideological doctrine. Whether one agrees with the government’s political economy or not, its efforts to familiarize citizens with meanings of entrepreneurialism have been successful (although in practice, the efforts to promote it have failed) (cf. Moya Muñoz & Molina Jara 2017 for a similar case study in Chile). Correlative to this, the positive undertones that support the concept of entrepreneurialism shape how people perceive it both as a practice and as a way of being in the world. Thus, to be entrepreneurial has become a commonplace term that speaks of being ‘good,’ ‘hard-working,’ ‘diligent,’ etc.; that is, to be entrepreneurial is a trait that endows one with social legitimacy.

Today, entrepreneurialism is a strong ingredient of one’s social identity/ies (Dodd 2002), whether experienced through doing business or, as this dissertation shows, through identifying with popular descriptions and definitions of the term. As one begins to see oneself first and foremost as an entrepreneur, she also abides by and at the same time further structures the cultural models of entrepreneurial being. Dodd argues that in that process it is the entrepreneur herself who becomes the center of her business endeavors; not the business she owns or runs. It is as if the barriers of one’s enterprise extended to oneself, turning one’s own life, body, and everyday practices also into sites of ‘being entrepreneurial’ (cf. Freeman 2014). Ulrich Bröckling, following Michel Foucault, calls this process an entrepreneurial subjectivation; a construction of “the Entrepreneurial Self” (Bröckling 2016). He writes: “The call to act as an entrepreneur of one’s own life produces a model for people to understand what they are and what they ought to be, and it tells them how to work on the self in order to become what they ought to be” (2016: viii). Cultures of psychosocial well-being and self-help and, in Wacquant’s words, the making of one’s body into a “body-enterprise,” showcase different iterations of

entrepreneurialism beyond business (Wacquant 1995). The incessant race towards self-improvement, perhaps most notable in the fitness and industry and economies of wellbeing writ-large, also corresponds to the moral imperatives that ‘being entrepreneurial’ cultivates. Following today’s neoliberal logic, which I discuss more in the next section, the embodied versions of entrepreneurialism translate into continuous corporeal investment, whether through club memberships or physical activity. In this dissertation, the chapter on the Ironsport triathlon team tackles the issue of the entrepreneurial body. It reveals the intersection between physical capital, (physical) entrepreneurialism, and body-centrism, and shows how the (athletic) body can be harnessed as an instrument for and a site of social mobility.

Diverse models of entrepreneurialism offer the agents a possibility to embrace multiple identities (Dodd 2002; Hanson & Blake 2009) at once. Monica DeHart argues that to self-identify as an entrepreneur in fact strengthens the other facets of one’s sense of self. Entrepreneurialism therefore can serve as a supporting force that helps to mobilize one’s other identities. One’s ethnicity, race, gender, or sexuality, for example, can be highlighted and performed through entrepreneurialism (DeHart 2010; Hanson & Blake 2009). As an example, ethnic tourism, such as in the case of Usonian’s tourist fare, illustrates how one can harness one’s ethno-racial selfhood for purposes of profit-making. Yet at the same time, it would be naïve to assume this ethno-racial highlighting to be all there is to one’s sense of self. On the contrary, the mobilization of ‘ethnic industries’ provides one with material bases to assert one’s self-identification as an entrepreneur and hence as a dynamic, productive citizen rather than simply a reified, ethnic *other* (Colloredo-Mansfeld 2011). This dissertation shows that the junctions where different identities converge are framed through a powerful sense of being entrepreneurial. In other words, those intersections open avenues for one to assert her place in

the world as somebody whose multiple other identities entrepreneurialism legitimizes or helps to foreground.

How, then, has entrepreneurialism become such a wide-spread phenomenon in a sociocultural rather than strictly economic sense? Many scholars argue that the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century neoliberalism has birthed the modern figure of a dynamic and creative entrepreneur (Dardot & Laval 2013; Freeman 2007, 2014; Harvey 2005; Svampa 2005). That entrepreneur, who is as socially and economically conscious as she is concerned with her own subjective wellbeing, embodies the neoliberal value systems that revere flexibility (Freeman 2007) and innovation, and perhaps above all, freedom (Rose 1999). Pierre Laval and Christian Dardot (2013) make a compelling point when arguing that we can no longer treat neoliberalism as an economic doctrine that frames political ideologies and governmental budget plans and that either fails or is successful. As an economic theory and practice, it does promote free markets and the reduction of the State's role in a sovereign nation's economic affairs while ensuring maximum legal protection for private investment (Bourdieu 1998). Yet four decades after the onset of structural adjustment plans, laissez-faire economic politics, and privatization waves across the world, neoliberalism has grown to be more than the initial sum total of its parts. As Laval and Dardot's book title states, neoliberalism is today's "new way of the world" (2013). In attempts to gauge the scope of meanings and implications the concept of neoliberalism harbors, scholars also deem it an art of "governmentality" (Foucault 2008), a set of mobile and migrating technologies of governance (Ong 2007), or a hegemonic mode of discourse incorporated into the everyday common sense (Harvey 2005). What makes it such a powerful world order –or an ideology– is the alluring promise of freedom that resides in its very core. Following Foucauldian philosophy of governmentality, Nikolas Rose (1999) argues that today's society, where neoliberalism in

itself is a way of governing, is founded on a shared understanding of autonomy which is as much individual as economic and institutional. At the same time, while ideals of freedom regulate neoliberal governmentality, they also complicate the traditionally linear relationship between the state and the citizen. Liberal techniques of governance mobilize the illusion that individuals are free and autonomous consumers and political agents; indeed, entrepreneurs of their own fate and wellbeing (ibid.).

The figure of the entrepreneur is the neoliberal citizen *par excellence*. Deeply embedded in the construction of the contemporary entrepreneur is the assumption of her inherent flexibility and ability to adapt to shifting economic, political and also personal circumstances. Flexibility and resilience as basic personal traits are necessary to encounter the demands of a liberal society. Thus, a logic of flexibility emerges as the principal mediating force not only at the face of changing and even volatile market economies but also the everyday life (Freeman 2007). Being an entrepreneur/entrepreneurial embodies the liberal ideals of freedom, autonomy, and flexibility, and as such, offers social status that ‘legitimizes’ one’s role as a productive (and not only consuming) citizen (Cf. Kessler 2003). For criollos, this ‘entrepreneurial pathway’ to legitimacy is particularly valuable. It allows them to become part of a socioeconomic force with possibilities to become upwardly mobile, which is precisely what their ethno-racial *otherness* has historically deprived them of.

## **Conclusion**

A study of socioeconomic mobility is by default also a study of class and socioeconomic categorizations, and social inequalities. It is a study of how we orient ourselves and (re)configure our positions vis-à-vis others in the different social spaces we occupy. Research on social

mobility also implies analyzing how we establish social hierarchies that affect how we perceive ourselves and are perceived by others. This dissertation is no exception to that. As an investigation into processes of social mobility, it puts under the microscope different factors that give shape and meaning to how we as social scientists think about and construct systems of class. But the aim of this dissertation is also to encompass more than an analysis of socioeconomic mobility alone. It examines the intersections between race and aspirations for class mobility and how in the Argentine context, mixed-race people may challenge those intersections. As this chapter has pointed out, research on class ascent through the lens of race has far shorter historical roots than research that examines class mobility within a racially homogenous context. That said, the vast scholarship today that focuses on class and class mobility in general is elemental to understanding how different variables –e.g. race, ethnicity, gender, geographical and cultural context– can affect processes of social mobility in practice.

This chapter has discussed scholarly perspectives on the dynamic relationship between race and the middle class. I have looked at how constructions of race in Latin America, and especially in Argentina, have evolved and grown more intertwined with research on class. One of the questions that Latin Americanists ask, is what constitutes the concepts of ‘whiteness,’ ‘blackness,’ or ‘mestizo-ness’ among others in different cultural contexts in the region. The racial connotations of these concepts may seem self-evident, yet at the same time, as many scholars point out, they are historically contingent and mobile cultural constructions with foundations rooted in techniques of governance. ‘Whiteness’ served as an aspirational identity bracket throughout the period of mass immigration in the Southern Cone and Brazil (1880-1930); a status for some and a goal for others to distinguish themselves as ‘decent’ and respectable citizens. Eventually, it turned into the hegemonic organizational principle that

structured racialized socioeconomic hierarchies. In Argentina, this shift serves as a starting point for many who study social mobility, race, and the role that ideas of whiteness (and *otherness*) have played in the making of a ‘modern, middle-class’ nation. It also serves as background to my research, which necessarily takes into account the historical processes that have shaped Santiago’s socioeconomic and racial hierarchies.

Against the backdrop of race-class relations, my dissertation analyzes how mixed-race Santiagueños can improve their social position and become socially mobile, ‘legitimate’ citizens. By being entrepreneurial or becoming entrepreneurs, they accumulate different kinds of capital, which, in turn, serve as important status currency and potentiate upward mobility. In the previous pages, I have drawn connections between entrepreneurialism and social mobility. I have also shown how widely shared and popular meanings of entrepreneurialism are so powerful in shaping one’s sense of self. Public and political discourses both create and disseminate imaginaries of contemporary entrepreneurialism. They imbue the concept with meaning by relating it to success and social status, and by linking it with characteristics such as flexibility, daringness, fearlessness, creativity, innovativeness, etc. That way, those discourses can also permeate people’s everyday vocabularies, inserting in them terminology that becomes readily accessible. Words such as *emprenduría* or *emprendedor* (entrepreneurialism and entrepreneurial) are now commonplace terms among my informants and as such, employable as nouns and adjectives that are easily relatable and applicable in diverse social contexts.

Finally, this chapter has discussed the meaning of entrepreneurialism and, by extension, social mobility in today’s neoliberal world order. Rather than critiquing it as a political and economic doctrine, I approach neoliberalism as an all-encompassing socio-political landscape where my research takes place. In the introduction to this dissertation, I describe Argentina’s



political environment in which I conducted my fieldwork. The radical shift from the left-wing Peronist-Kirchnerist rule to right-wing, openly neoliberal government led by Mauricio Macri (2015-2019) accentuated the role of the entrepreneur as a key contributor to economic growth.<sup>53</sup> In contrast, the previous left-wing government had emphasized the role of the consumer as well as the national industry as the principal drivers for financial markets. It was deemed a ‘post-neoliberal’ government and a direct response to the debacle of the 1990s’ neoliberal economic reign (e.g. Bonnet 2016; Martínez 2013). In fact, many declared it the triumphant result of the death of neoliberalism. However, following the argument that neoliberalism has grown to be much more than a simple recipe for a type of political economy, it is logical to see it as foundational to the changing parameters that shape the meanings of a modern productive citizen. One of those meanings is rooted in entrepreneurialism, indicating the emergence of the ‘entrepreneurial citizen’ as the principal agent of socioeconomic change.

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<sup>53</sup> Macri’s efforts failed miserably. During his presidency, the country entered in its worst economic crisis since 2001, the Argentine peso devaluated in relation to the US dollar, and annual inflation crept up to nearly 60% (as of 2019).

### Chapter 3: Body work and social capital among triathletes

*Triathlon: a multi-discipline endurance sport consisting of swimming, cycling, and running. The standard distance, which was first included in the Olympic program in the Sydney games in 2000, requires 1500m (0.9miles) of swimming, 40km (24.8mi) of cycling, and 10km (6.2mi) of running. The medium distance is made up of 1900m (1,2mi) swimming, 90km (52mi) cycling, and 21km (half marathon) of running. The full distance is twice the length of medium distance.*

#### Introduction

This chapter examines how young criollo athletes from economically deprived backgrounds aim to improve their socioeconomic status through accumulating physical and social capital. It is a story of the interactions between two different social worlds in Santiago del Estero's principal triathlon team, *Club de Triatlón Ironsport*—from here on, “the team” or “the club.” I analyze the transactional value between physical and social capital as I explore the literally embodied aspect of social mobility; that is, the high-performing, status-earning body as an instrument of social success. The team contains a specific space where these two forms of capital reveal their transactional value, i.e. their convertibility into status currency. The team's socioeconomic and racial structure is highly polarized, containing on one hand well-to-do amateur athletes and, on the other hand, young, talented mixed-race athletes from economically poor, lower-class backgrounds. Yet as a site for joint production of bodily capital, the team bridges this polarity, enabling the two different social worlds to partially overlap. The overlapping area constitutes a ‘sporting field’ where its agents engage in the acquisition of and transactions between physical and social capital. In doing so, the young athletes establish social contacts and imbibe lifestyle influences from the other team members.

The team belongs to Ironsport Center for Physical Activity. The center consists of a chain of five high-end gyms and a still incipient (but growing) foundation that aims to cultivate physical education in poor neighborhoods and thus engage children with sports to prevent substance abuse and delinquency. Besides the triathlon team, Ironsport houses a running team. Many triathletes train with the runners and while the runners may not race in triathlons, the triathletes often participate in running competitions. Of the Club's 40 members, around 15 are young (16-27 years), talented athletes with scarce economic resources called *becados* (translated as "sponsored" or "grantees." I will, however, use the Spanish word throughout this text). The *becados* train free of charge and the club usually also pays for their racing expenses. In exchange for the Ironsport's sponsorship, they must be enrolled in a higher education institution. The rest of the members must pay a fixed monthly fee. There were different fee brackets, the highest of which was around 100USD in 2017. Socioeconomically, the other team members are mostly professionals with higher education degrees. In this chapter, I refer to them as 'paying members' or 'lifestyle athletes,' and also as 'middle-class members.' I often wondered if a federal judge or a rich investor, both members of Ironsport, could really be seen as 'middle-class' when in fact it was fairly obvious that they formed part of Santiago's economic and political elites. However, since all the team members whom I asked about their class identification –the federal judge and the investor included– called them themselves *gente de clase media* –middle-class people– and were also called as such by the *becados*, I use the same designation.

The club is not only a site for demanding triathlon training. It is also an interactional space that fosters social inclusion and mobility among the *becados* while offering a professional sports environment for those who pay to train and consider triathlon as an integral part of their lifestyle. As I will show, the intra-group dynamics and its members' interactions reveal a

landscape where physical performance, success, status, and social mobility are continuously negotiated. These negotiations, on one hand, shape the members' understandings of themselves as athletes –especially among the middle-class members–, conferring a sense of social distinction on them. On the other hand, the negotiations shape especially the *becados'* conceptions of themselves as socially mobile, status-building individuals potentiated by the respect they earn as athletes. What undergirds these processes is the team members' shared passion for a sport that even on an amateur level requires dedication, steadfast self-discipline, and an unrelenting desire to test the limits of the body's performance capacity.

I analyze social mobility through physical/bodily and social capital. To unpack how bodily capital is mobilized both as currency for respect and social status, I turn to L  ic Wacquant's research (1995) on the social structuring of the bodily capital in a boxing club in Chicago and the embodied performance of boxers. Furthermore, my description of the *becados* as *athletic entrepreneurs* continues to borrow from Wacquant as I analyze this embodied form of entrepreneurialism through presenting the body as an enterprise in its own right. I discuss the *becados'* physical entrepreneurialism from two different angles. First, informed by Michel Foucault's theory on discipline of the body, I examine the athletic body as a site for the production of physical capital. It is also the body itself that regulates and capitalizes on the transactional value of its physical capital in relation to social capital –namely, respect and status. In that sense, the body of a triathlete is an entrepreneurial project in its own right whose success is rooted in discipline (training), risk-taking (possibility of injury, especially in cycling), flexibility (willingness to organize one's life primarily in relation to one's sport), and resilience (recovering from injuries and disappointments). The second angle recasts the physical entrepreneur as an *entrepreneurial athlete*. More specific to the context of the club, approaching

the *becados* as entrepreneurial athletes allows for an examination of their motivations, their fears and aspirations, and from where they imbibe the references for their aspirations and transforming understandings of themselves. In this context, the interactions with the paying members both within the confines of and outside the club in social get-togethers, play a crucial role.

The ethnographic accounts focus both of the *becados* and the team's middle-class members. I first introduce Mario Diaz, 42, the founder of Ironsport, and the club's principal coach. Among the team's *becados*, there is Karen Pereyra, 24, who competes internationally and recently received Santiago's print media's annual "best athlete" award. There is also Alberto Gomez –alias Locutor–, 22, who is a student in the *Profesorado* of Physical Education (PE teachers' academy) and a national champion in duathlon.<sup>54</sup> Recently he has started to manufacture energy bars in his kitchen to sell at Ironsport and earn money to travel abroad. I also present Mauricio Juarez who, at the age of 16, is the club's youngest member; a promising athlete with high aspirations to study law and, in his words, "become somebody important."

I also bring in the voices of some of the club's paying members. Agustín Soria, 50, is the owner of an upscale restaurant in Santiago and also owns the National University's canteen where the *beacarios* receive their daily lunch, sponsored by Ironsport. Karina Gelid, 42, an accountant, and Pedro Simon, 52, a federal judge, are long-term triathletes whose presence in the team is crucial to its workings as a space for social inclusion. As I discuss the club members' narratives, I delineate an image of a micro universe where sports, social inclusion, status-building, and a particular form of entrepreneurialism harnessed for purposes of social mobility all intersect.

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<sup>54</sup> Duathlon, which is considered a sub-discipline of triathlon, consists of a running leg, followed by a cycling leg and then another running leg. Similar to triathlon, duathlon has different distance formats. Unlike triathlon, it is not an Olympic sport.

### Meeting Mario and arriving in Ironsport

I first met Mario on an early Sunday morning while cycling, in January 2017. There are three roads in Santiago that lend themselves for road cycling. That morning I had chosen one that tends to be devoid of traffic on Sundays. I had ridden about 20 miles when another cyclist appeared next to me, going at a much higher speed. Given the kind of bicycle he was riding, I could see he was a triathlete. As Mario would later confess to me, he deemed it odd that a *woman* would be riding by herself on that road on an early Sunday morning. Thus, instead of waving good-bye and heading on at 28mph, he slowed down, introduced himself and asked what on earth I was doing there, at 7.30 AM. The first thought in my mind, as Mario rode closer to me, was to kick his bike off the road and cycle away to safety as fast as possible –I recognize my susceptibility to the culture of fear that especially women in Santiago share.<sup>55</sup> But I deterred myself for he didn't seem or sound menacing. Soon enough, he detected my foreign accent and asked me where I was from and what I was doing in Santiago. As we continued to ride (at my pace), I told him I was a student of social sciences and was living in Santiago to conduct research. I also gave him a summary of my research interests in race, class and social mobility. As soon as I finished my exposé, he announced that I should interview him. Pinching his skin, he declared “look, I’m a *negro*” (black) and then touched his nose to convince me that he was truly mixed-race with African blood. This sparked a conversation that would last for the rest of the ride and, in a way, continue throughout the rest of my fieldwork. While we were cycling, I learnt that the person I was chatting with was Mario Diaz; a former elite triathlete who owns Ironsport

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<sup>55</sup> The kind of culture of fear that I refer to stems from constant warnings, mostly directed at women, of e.g. avoiding certain areas and neighborhoods in the city and not walking anywhere alone at night. While these are sensible suggestions, they permeate everyday conversations more than anywhere else that I have similar experience of, thereby, in my view, generating more fear than simply caution.

gyms. I had heard about Ironsport before and knew people who were members. I also knew that the owner was a successful athlete renowned for his rags-to-riches life story. I never thought I would meet him, let alone interview him, and even less, become one of his trainees. And yet our 70-mile bicycle ride that morning ended with a shared Gatorade and an agreement that the following day I would be at his gym at 6am to start triathlon training. I would also start interviewing him and members of his triathlon club –especially the *becados*– for the purposes of my research. And finally, I would help him with any form of research he would need, especially regarding his ongoing projects in the field of public health and physical activity. Gradually I also became his interlocutor with whom to discuss his ideas, life and work philosophies, and what he called his revolution.

Mario competed internationally until his 30s and was a multiple national champion in the middle-distance triathlon. Although he stopped competing in the elite/professional category at 31, he continues to compete as an amateur nationally and internationally. There was no question about him starting his own triathlon team as part of Ironsport, he now says. He continues to plan his personal trainees' workout programs, is present in the gym at 5.30 every morning to coach members of the team, joins the team at the track, and also trains together with those whose performance level is closer to his. Given our mutual assistance and collaboration agreement of my triathlon training and research for my own and his purposes, I became one of his personal trainees. Also, since I had a strong background in long-distance running, as part our pact of mutual aid I was often called to work as the amateur athletes' pacesetter for the more strenuous running exercises. (Pacesetter means the person who leads a pack of runners (or one or two runners) by setting a certain pace or by serving as a mock competitor to help the running partner(s) go faster – especially when running fast laps at the track. It is not a particularly

coveted position as it means one is essentially running away from others, despite the position implying a positive recognition of one's speed.)

For the following 12 months, until the end of my fieldwork, I became part of the club and interviewed, observed, and befriended many of the *becados* and the other middle-class members. We trained together up to seven, eight times a week. We also raced together, and on a couple of occasions, travelled outside the city to national competitions. Often after our 6am session, some of us would sit at a café opposite to the gym and chat away about life and sports. It was especially during those conversations that I inquired and learnt about people's lives, their motivations, their meanings of success, and their aspirations. The more formal interviews I usually conducted later during the day, often in the same café, when people would be either done with their classes or with their work. I also interviewed and conversed with my informants during countless bike rides and runs. Although there were around 40 members in the club during my fieldwork, besides some of the shared morning sessions in the gym or the track, it was every athlete's own responsibility to follow the program and agree with others about what training sessions we could share and when. I aimed to go for runs and rides with as many different people as possible, usually with only one or two others; sometimes in a pack of ten cyclists. That way, Tuesday and Thursday afternoon bike rides and Thursday and Saturday morning long runs tended to convert into semi-structured interviews with the person I was riding or running with. My teammates were aware of my work, which Mario did not fail to mention when he introduced me to new people. But gradually, I also managed to integrate in the team as an athlete and become something other than just a "spy."



### **Ironsport: a site for revolution**

Mario Diaz founded Ironsport in 2011, at the age of 35. By then, Mario had already made himself a career and a name as a basketball coach in Argentina's and Venezuela's national basketball leagues. With the capital he had been able to save, he built his own modest house in the outskirts of Santiago and set the first Ironsport gym. "It was like a garage" compared to what Ironsport gyms now look like, Mario now says. It did not take long until the clientele in his gym began to grow. From the very start, the clientele represented Santiago's affluent sectors. They were drawn to the personalized training services that Ironsport offered as first of its kind in Santiago. Moreover, some of them had already been Mario's personal trainees when he was still studying to become a physical education teacher and could spread the word of his coaching talents and sports knowledge. The gym's approach to exercise was novel and innovative. For example, it opened at 6am and did not close for siesta, which in Santiago was unheard of. The exercise plans were tailored according to the student's desires and necessities, and, importantly, the gym also had its own running and triathlon teams. Ironsport hit the vein of a growing business revolving around exercise and physical wellbeing, and with its gym services, its popularity grew rapidly. According to some long-standing members, Ironsport was from early on considered "a middle-class gym." This characterization does not seem to have changed. When I asked about it, my informants would readily –and matter-of-factly– say that being part of Ironsport implied being part of Santiago's small middle and upper-middle class.

In contrast with his clientele, Mario himself was born into abject poverty. He grew up in an urban *rancho*<sup>56</sup> without running water or proper roof. He claims, with a degree of pride, that

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<sup>56</sup> *Rancho* in Argentina means a rural dwelling with usually no running water or electricity. They are considered a public health and safety hazard for their lack of hygiene and deplorable safety conditions. However, there are also ranchos in the outskirts of Santiago, perhaps best comparable to slum houses.

he started building his curriculum vitae as a garbage picker, at the age of ten. “Often there was nothing else to eat at home but rice, and then *tortilla* and *mate cocido*,” Mario says.<sup>57</sup>

That’s what my mom would give us in the afternoons for *merienda*<sup>58</sup> and sometimes that was all we had to eat until the next day. So I had to work and my siblings as well, and my cousins who lived nearby, and when I say work, I mean work in almost anything, like garbage picking...you know, I was one of those *negritos* who you see in the center who collect litter and garbage and take it to the junkyard and hope there’s something valuable to take...In my teens, I started working at the bus station as a *maletero*, you know, loading and unloading people’s suitcases in the buses and getting small tips, the pay was miserable. And there was a lot of petty crime going on, most *maleteros* had some shady side business going on, many stole whatever they could. I thank my lord now that I kept myself away from it. Instead, I wanted to start a union and make sure we all get even pay!

- Did you manage to start a union?
- No. I got fired. But I already had work elsewhere; I always found work somehow, it’s one of my blessings.

Mario was able to climb upwards in a society where ‘people like him’ would usually either end up imprisoned in cycles of poverty or literally, in jail.

I always wanted more, aspired for things that we didn’t have. But I didn’t just *want* stuff; I *worked* to get what I wanted, things like have a bed for myself and not share it with my siblings and have a bed for each of my siblings as well. I wanted a real roof. My dad’s salary was next to nothing and anyways he drank most of it in the weekends, and my mom worked as a cleaner, but she was also a real entrepreneur who baked and made food to sell and we sold her breads and pizzas in the neighborhood. Then we were able to get a government aid plan and build our own house next to where the *rancho* had been and use whatever little savings we had to get some furniture.

I remember this one time when a school friend of mine, Martín is his name, and we’re still friends, took me to his home. I don’t know why he had befriended me, he was from a good family and lived in a big house and I was this *negrito* from a poor neighborhood. Anyways I went with him to his home and...(long pause)...it was something I’d never seen except in the TV. Martín had his own room and there was a real kitchen and all the furniture...it was incredible. I remember I was twelve, and I remember I decided that someday me and my family, my mom, would have all that as well.

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<sup>57</sup> In Argentina, *tortilla* means a flat bread baked with lard. *Mate cocido* is an infusion made with yerba mate.

<sup>58</sup> *Merienda* means an afternoon snack, usually eaten at around 6-7pm

Then Mario decided to study. Nobody in Mario's neighborhood studied, he says. In fact, it was so unusual that Mario's father became convinced Mario was gay: he felt embarrassed his son would dedicate so much time to school. Even so, Mario graduated from the secondary school as among the best in his class. Moreover, already as a child, he showed talent in sports. As most young boys, he grew up playing soccer "on a dusty field with an imaginary goal" and excelled in any other form of sport he engaged in. In terms of his professional plans, he considered three different career options: join the military, join the federal police force, or become a physical education teacher. His mother convinced him not to go to the military. He got into the federal police force with highest entry points in the Northwestern region, however, that year –1995– severe federal budget cuts led the police force to cancel the new freshman class and thus Mario stayed in Santiago. He opted for studies in Santiago's *Profesorado* for Physical Education, excelled in all subjects, and graduated one year ahead of others in his class. Subsequently he did his second degree in sport science in the university. It was during his studies to become a PE teacher that he became interested in triathlon.

It was some local race that Miguel<sup>59</sup> had organized and I thought it would be fun to see what it was like. I had a bike, like a really old mountain bike that I used to go to school and to work, and I think my running shoes had holes. Anyways, I did well, even though in the middle of the bike part one of the pedals came off. Victor<sup>60</sup> saw me there. After the race he approached me and asked if I was interested in training more seriously. So I started training and competing and winning, it was all pretty crazy, those years. Because I also graduated, started working in three different schools as a teacher, and also had a child with my girlfriend then. And then I decided to study another degree in sport science in Catamarca...I still didn't have a car so I went to Catamarca by bicycle, 240km, stayed there for a few days for classes and then rode back. And that's when I decided to stop competing and dedicate myself to studies and my profession... and then came the offer from the basketball team in Venezuela.

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<sup>59</sup> Miguel Fonseca is the first national-level triathlete in Santiago and the founder of Santiago's triathlon and duathlon association.

<sup>60</sup> Victor Farath, a renowned athletics and triathlon coach in the Northwestern region.

Mario's concern has always been as much with running a business as with being a coach and a social entrepreneur aiming to improve Santiagueños' quality of life through sports. He calls himself a *revolucionario*. "Moreover, a revolutionary and a *negro!*" (*Es más, soy un revolucionario y negro!*).

The revolution in question is the social empowerment of young athletes through training in competitive sports and higher education. He runs the triathlon team which (in 2017) has around 40 members. 15 of them (in 2017) are sponsored by Ironsport.<sup>61</sup> In order to have free access to his gym, team membership, and to compete as representatives of his club, the *becados* must be enrolled in a higher education institution. Further, being simply enrolled is not enough; they must also show they are progressing with their studies. Most of the *becados* are studying in at the PE *Profesorado* to become PE teachers; a few are studying degrees in the National University. All the *becados* I came to know, some of whom had by then become coaches in different Ironsport gyms, came from economically deprived backgrounds. In most cases, they had started their sports career while in the secondary school, where some sharp-eyed teacher with genuine interest in her work would start pushing the student towards trying out, say, athletics or swimming. Sometimes it had been the very teacher who had contacted Mario to inquire whether he would be willing to take another trainee into his club. Among his *becados* are also those who had arrived at Ironsport while already enrolled in the *Profesorado*. Given Mario's role in Santiago's sports scene and his connections in the *Profesorado*, it was common that students in that institute would reach out to him and ask if they could start training at Ironsport. Mario, whose business philosophy bends more towards altruism than profit-making, would most often welcome these students into his club.

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<sup>61</sup> There are another 10 *becados* who do not train specifically as triathletes but are runners or cyclists. They would sometimes practice with the triathlon team; other times they would have their own training plans.

### **A gym, a track, and a coffee place**

Members of the triathlon team meet at Ironsport *Premium* for strength and running workouts three times a week. There are usually around 10 people who enter at 6am for the day's first time slot; others enter at 8am and still others in the late afternoon, after the siesta. *Premium* is a rectangular room full of gym equipment and with little open space. A long mirror borders one of the side walls, giving a false sense of spaciousness while also serving as an omniscient reflector of one's own and other people's doings. At around 8am, when those who have entered at 6am have not yet left, the gym becomes so crowded that it is difficult to conduct one's exercise routine without having to wait or negotiate turns for one machine or another. In the background, a YouTube playlist tailored for gyms keeps the silence away at low volume; on the gym's only TV, Latin American ESPN sports channel plays nonstop. Right by the entrance there is a small desk with a computer, various kinds of fliers and advertisements and, most importantly, a tray with a thermos bottle, a *mate*, and a bag of yerba mate. Any of the coaches working at the gym in the mornings or any of the gym-goers, is free to prepare mate and, if preparing it, obligated to pass it along and offer it to whomever might be near. Often a mate would be handed to somebody still on the ground after a series of 50 abdominals or 30 push-ups; the person would drink it all in three or four long sips and then carry onto the next exercise set. "It's Argentine doping," Nery, one of the coaches and former *becado*, would say.

*Premium* sits at the intersection of two streets dotted with bars and restaurants. It is only a block away from Santiago's main –one could say the only– park that borders the Rio Dulce, a river that contours the city's edge. The park contains large sporting facilities and areas, from the municipal swimming pool and a BMX (bicycle motor cross) track to athletics and an equestrian

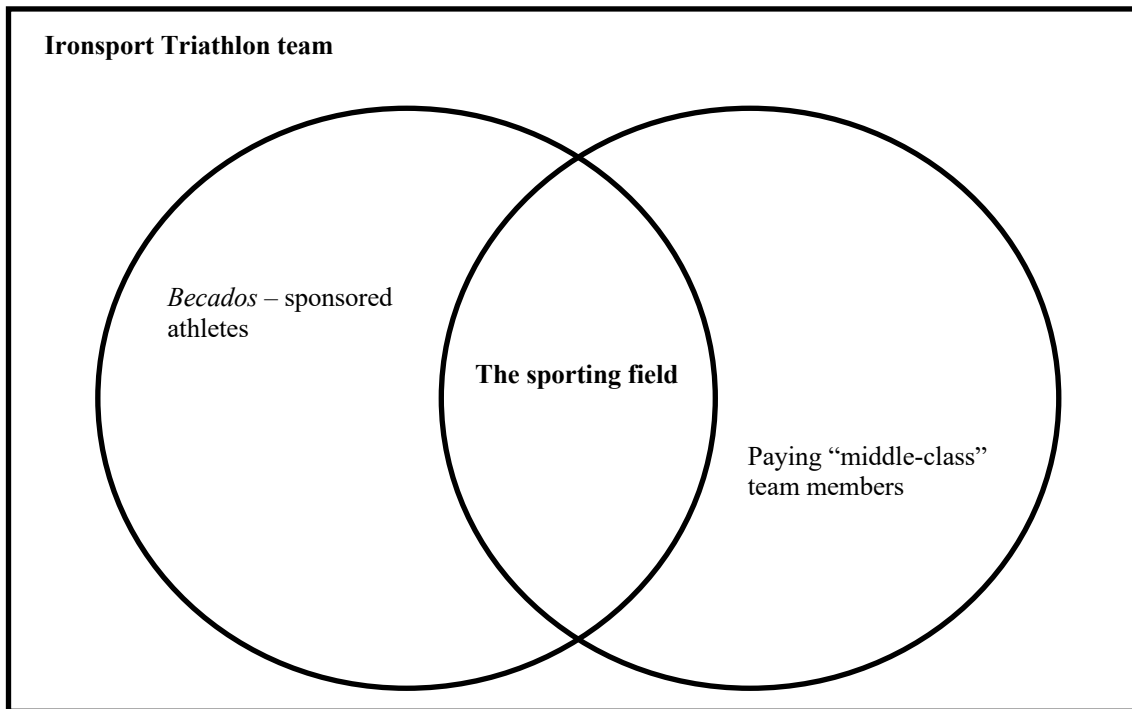
track. All the sports infrastructure in the park is relatively new, the fruit of the provincial government's investment in public, recreational spaces in the city. The Olympic-size municipal pool, which was inaugurated in December 2016, is the only one of its kind in the entire Northwestern region –and it is free for the public. A couple of hundred yards from the swimming pool there is the athletics track. Once a week, the team would meet in the gym early morning and run to the track for technique and speed work. In contrast with the other, new facilities in the sports complex –the area in the park where most of the sports infrastructure is located–, the track looks rather derelict. Besides the six-lane track itself surrounding a field that is never green, there is only one small concrete construction that looks more like a wide staircase to nowhere than an area for the audience to sit, and three water fountains of which one usually works. During the hottest months, from November through March, the already worn-out tarmac absorbs heat from the early morning onwards and then radiates it back twice as hot, maliciously collaborating with the scorching sun. Nobody in their right mind wants to train there after 9am; by 10am, when the temperature is often already above 110F, the track is devoid of all life.

In front of the *Premium*, on the other side of the street, sits a small Café called Tanttá. Mario calls it his office. In fact, he spends about as much time there as he does on the other side of the street at *Premium*, arranging his business meetings and other informal gathering at the back of the café and keeps an open tab for all his (and many others') consumption and pays it in the end of the month. For many other gym-goers and their coaches, Tanttá is a site for post-workout breakfasts and get-togethers. The owner, Beatriz, is a client at Ironsport and friends with many members in the triathlon team. As much as *Premium* and the athletics track, Tanttá became one of my key research sites in relation to the Club. Not only did I conduct most of my interviews there, but the endless ex tempore meetings with people from the gym and the Club

that took place there served as excellent sources of information. Moreover, since I lived only three blocks away from the café and did not have internet at home, Tantta was also a convenient place for me to work. There were times, however, when some of the coaches who were also my informants, would quite directly suggest that if I were not a spy, I was definitely a stalker. I found it relatively difficult to dispute it.

### **The ‘sporting field’**

I learnt to see the club as an intersection of different social spaces where the shared sport, training, and racing potentiate and frame the production of physical/bodily capital. In the club, as if forming a Venn diagram, two different social spaces, marked by the agents’ social position, overlap and create a dynamic field of shared practices which I analyze as a “sporting field” (Bourdieu 1978; Nettleton 2003; Tulle 2008). In the sporting field, one’s sense of agency and aspirations is rehearsed through the body. Rather than material assets or consumption practices, in the sporting field it is first and foremost the body that is engaged in the production of social status and distinction. In that sense, the sporting field turns into a competitive arena of situated practices –training for and doing a specific sport– that enable the accumulation of bodily capital and hosts an ongoing struggle for social and cultural capital among its agents (Bourdieu 2010; Tulle 2008).



The Club’s *becados* are mostly mixed-race Santiagueños, their dark complexion correlating with their poor socioeconomic position. Within the Club, the question of race is a source of banter together with the members’ other physical attributes, which are subject to amicable yet often also harsh joking. In the introduction, I have explained the negative connotations that the term *negro* is usually loaded with. Besides meaning dark complexion, it alludes to being poor, lazy, uneducated, delinquent, etc. However, *negro/a* can also be employed as a nickname without any clear discriminatory connotations, akin to terms like *gordo/a* (fat), *flaco/a* (thin), or *viejo/a* (old). When used as nouns (instead of as adjectives), they are very common and often expressed with fondness, e.g. couples calling each other *mi* (my) *negro/a*, or *gorda/gordo/gordi*. Furthermore, it is very typical and culturally accepted to refer to and address people with nicknames derived from their physical attributes. Thus, this happens in the club, too, where those with darker skin are called “negro/as” by white and mixed-race members alike.



There I observed that as a nickname, it really did appear to be devoid of connotations other than one's skin color – and I also realized that I could not translate the workings of this kind of appellation into other languages. But outside the club's confines, the use of *negro/a* again became less innocent. In private conversations with some of the white middle-class members I attested to them using *negro* as a pejorative designation of Santiago's poor.

While I argue that the team's sporting field fosters interactions between the *becados* and the paying members that generate social inclusion and contribute to the *becados'* potential socioeconomic mobility, I do not suggest that these interactions erase the power relations between race and class. Instead, the team's sporting field harbors a social space in which the verticality of this relationship and its hierarchical structure become more flexible and negotiable. Many scholars studying the relationship between class and race in Latin America have argued that historically, among immigrant populations who were racially non-white and ethnically non-European, economic growth served as a series of steppingstones towards becoming 'whiter' (Garguín 2009, Grosso 2008, Lesser 2013). The whitening process was both behavioral (e.g. adoption of consumption practices associated with middle-classness) and social (e.g. becoming 'respectable' in the society's eyes) (Garguín 2009; Owensby 1999). It contributed to the building of a nationhood in countries that were in search of their identity amidst receiving waves of foreign immigrants in the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, such as Brazil, Argentina, and Uruguay. In that sense, race shifted from determining the person's freedom and life chances to being determined by the experience of socioeconomic mobility; a process that has attracted social scientific research for a while now (cf. Colloredo-Mansfeld 1999, Joseph 2000).

In sports, however, this dyad can be undone. It would be sheer fantasy to claim that sports automatically, or even often, de-racializes and offers avenues for socioeconomic mobility.

But what sports can do, is to convert the body and its athletic prowess into the axis that the ideas and the lived experience of race and class revolve around. Social scientists focusing on sports have studied the triangular relationship between sports, class, and race from college athletics in the United States and club sports to professional soccer in Europe. These studies note that while participation in e.g. college sports does not necessarily lead to socioeconomic mobility, the accumulation of social capital that participation in a given sport may offer can facilitate it (Agergaard 2018, Harris 1994, Mackin & Walther 2012, Maguire 1988). Contacts, connections, friendships and, as with the case of American college sports, education, tend to have a positive impact on the young, racially and ethnically diverse athletes' future prospects and sense of self (Harris 1994). Ironsport and the team offer similar potential for the *becados*. The sporting field makes it possible to analyze the accrual of physical capital as a kind of embodied social capital. This, in turn, challenges the primacy of one's racial phenotype as the determining factor for one's social status. However, it is not that race somehow miraculously disappears in the club's sporting field. The constant phenotype-related banter and how my informants discuss their own skin color (often through jokes) stand as testament to it, and it is not always clear whether the banter has racist undertones or not. Rather, the agents in the sporting field –the *becados* and the paying members alike– renegotiate their racial and class distinctions in relation to shared understandings of athletic success and passion for the sport. Physical capacities, such as a speed, strength and endurance gain prominence as status currency, thereby modifying the social models that often assume race as the determining factor for one's socioeconomic position.

Physical capital refers to the embodied form of cultural capital; that is, cultural capital – e.g. education– etched into one's physique through bodily education, such as training, and physical performance (Wacquant 1995). However, while I recognize the relationship between

physical and cultural capital, I approach physical capital as a gateway toward social rather than cultural capital. Physical strength and athletic prowess tend to hold intrinsic value and serve as important currency for one's social –and also economic– status. They potentially 'open doors,' and also generate admiration whose focus can easily bypass one's features or characteristics that the society would otherwise not endorse – in Santiago, for instance, being mixed-race. For the paying members of the club, physical capital as status currency implies certain fame or reputation among their own professional, familial, and friend circles; a mark of distinction. For the *becados*, it signifies public recognition that is wider in its extent<sup>62</sup> and acknowledgment which could lead to further opportunities, such as sponsorship (Fletcher 2008).

“Social capital,” writes Bourdieu, “is the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition—or in other words, to membership in a group—which provides each of its members with the backing of the collectivity-owned capital, a “credential” which entitles them to credit in the various senses of the word. (1986:248-249).

Robert Putnam, on the other hand, states that social capital “refers to features of social organization such as networks, norms, and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit” (1995:66). While Putnam employs his understanding of social capital especially in the context of political, economic and civic engagement, it also serves as a lens to observe the structure of the capital transactions in the Club. If we approach social capital as a form of currency that facilitates cooperation and common good, it becomes possible to analyze the team member's interactions as a continuous process of network-building, socializing, and also a continuing concatenation of favors. Doctors in the team, for instance, provide medical certificates (without any relevant checkups) and prescriptions as per other team members' needs;

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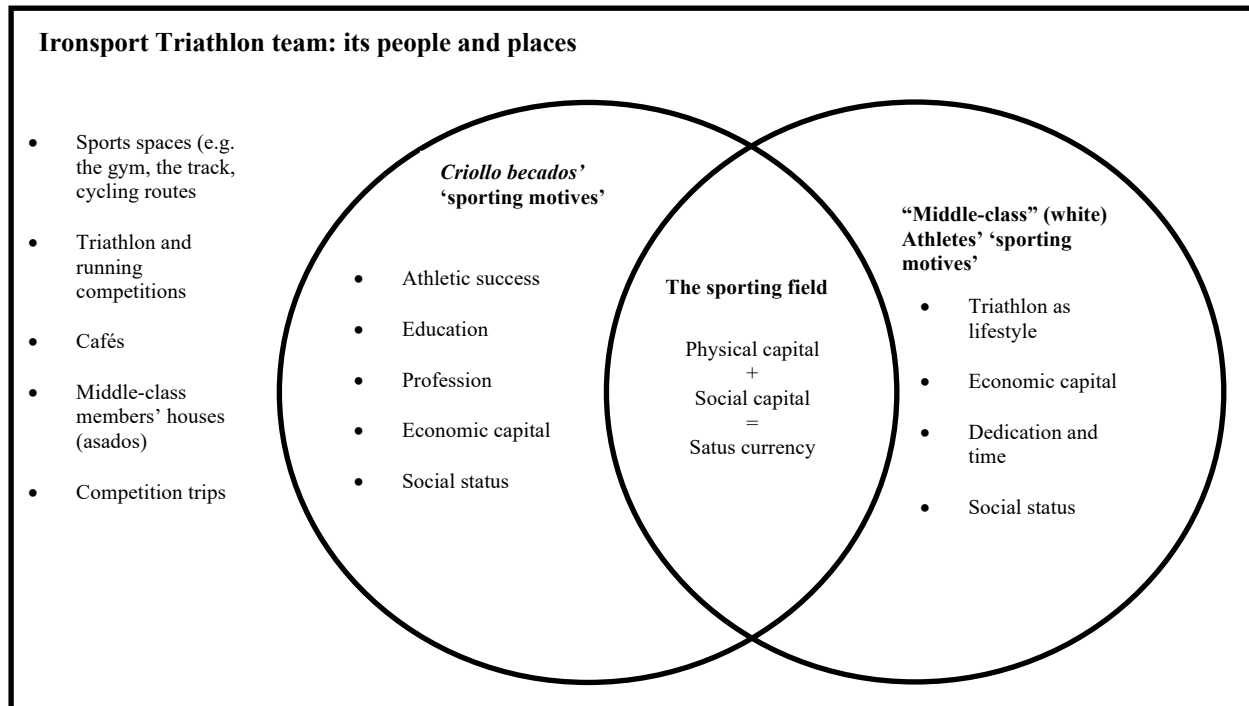
<sup>62</sup> For example, recognition the *becados* receive in the media, or in annual sports awards.

they may also offer medical assistance in their practice without charge. Lawyers and accountants readily provide advice on related matters free of charge; lawyers with different degrees of political power may “speed things up a bit” in the tribunal for those involved in lawsuits or other legal cases –free of charge. In this sense, trust works as adhesive material that maintains the chain together and keeps it in motion. It springs from the sense of complicity that a shared passion –or madness, as some team members claim– for a sport that has little public significance can generate. It stems from the accrual of physical capital through shared training, performance, development, success, and pain. And it evolves in spaces outside the Club, where the members get together and further consolidate their relationships. The Club therefore appears as a production site for social capital through providing opportunities for networking, contacts, and also friendships.

### **The interactive sporting field**

While the Club is a community bound together by shared values, interests, and also economically determined membership, it materializes in different concrete places for training and performance enhancement, namely the gym *Premium*, the athletics track, the park, and even the city’s outback roads where people go to cycle. These locations serve as the physical context for the sporting field in which the different capital negotiations take place. In a sporting field, agents are situated vis-à-vis each other on the bases of, for instance, their physical capacity, their history in the sport, and their level of dedication (e.g. how much training, how many races in a year, how far those races are). The question of socioeconomic class is intrinsic to these factors. However, it may also get masked by, say, one’s level of expertise and success. In that sense, the

sporting field is like an arena where one's physical capacities become equally, if not more, important than the symbolic and material markers of one's class position.



Take a scene from a bicycle training session: On a long ride, when a pack of ten members of the Club cycles anywhere between 60 and 100km, Locutor, one of the *becados* and a national champion in duathlon, often leads the group. His bicycle is an old Colner with an aluminum frame that he has bought with "hard work and much sacrifice." Most of the cyclists in the pack boast carbon bikes that even in the United States cost a minimum of 1500 dollars; in Argentina roughly twice as much. 1500 dollars for a triathlon bike in the U.S. is on the lower end of the price spectrum. But in Argentina, the relative value of such a bicycle is extremely high. "Eh, Locu, stop screwing us up with that speed," somebody would shout; "Locu you're a damn beast (*maldito bestia*)!" On one occasion I recall Benjamin, an owner of a hedge fund, making a

remark about how a body as thin as Locutor's can produce such speed. On the other hand, once in a conversation with Locutor about his success and his desires to develop as an athlete, he said to me that if only he had a racing bicycle like Benjamin's or Pedro's, he would go much faster. Thus, the sporting field may dissimulate socioeconomic differences when the field materializes in the action of doing the sport. However, those differences and even clashes are always implicitly present in any given sport through its material demands such as equipment or traveling possibilities (Bourdieu, 2010; Nettleton 2013; Wacquant 1995; Warde, 2006).

The Club is a cultural microcosm with its own social structure, hierarchy, and norms that frame the intra-group dynamics and the different capital transactions among its members. Apart from contextualizing the process of converting physical capital into social capital, the Club also mediates it. Simply the name itself, Club de triatlón *Ironsport*, resonates in Santiago. While many Santiagueños might not know about the existence of the Club or even know what triathlon means, Ironsport –the gym, the sport center– has become nothing short of an establishment in the city. Mario Diaz regularly appears in the media both for his own athletic achievements and as a consultant for different matters regarding sports, exercise, and public health and physical wellbeing. Further, the gym's subscribers tend to represent those sectors of the society whose occupational and economic standing imply socioeconomic stability and affords them power and authority. With these two factors together –the Club as context for and the Club as a mediator between the different socioeconomic worlds within the Club–, being part of Ironsport, whether as a regular gym-goer or as an athlete, tends to entail access to and/or possession of social capital and serves as important status currency.

Finally, the Club works as an enterprise that potentiates social inclusion. For the *becados*, training in and representing the Club and mingling with its paying members implies witnessing

and learning about lifestyles that from their perspective, as one of my informants once said, seem like a fairytale. Yet among the *becados* there is also a sense of pressure that grows from the need to perform particularly well and prove themselves through athletic success. Earning other club members' respect is tightly linked to a constant accrual of physical capital. That pressure is less present among the Club's middle-class members. It is certainly important for most of them to develop their performance and improve their race times. Yet there is also a shared understanding among them that to a certain degree the Club, in fact, depends on them. Moreover, although it is not the Club that sponsors the *becados* but the Ironsport enterprise as a whole, among my informants there were many who saw themselves as participants in the Club's endeavor to foster social inclusion. For them, the Club therefore does not only provide context for practicing their lifestyle sport. Nor does it only provide them status currency because of their membership in Ironsport and for being among very few who dedicate their time to such a demanding sport as triathlon. For them, being part of the team also satisfies their desire to harness their social consciousness in practice. As my informants Agustín and Karina said, it makes them feel like being part of something bigger than simply their own individual performance. At the same time, acting upon their social consciousness inevitably also buttresses their image and reputation among their own social circles. It is one thing to be a triathlete whose chosen sport speaks of utmost self-disciplines and fitness; it is another thing to be a triathlete *and* a benefactor whose actions speak of social engagement and generosity – both also part of status currency that being part of the Club provides.

**“You’re not a model; you’re an athlete!”**

In the early morning at the gym, the beginning of ruthless banter forces one to find her wit while waking up the body (and the mind) through different exercises. The usual topics for the continuous joking are people’s physical performance and appearance, whether it be about how tired one gets or how much one sweats with the exercise sets, what one is wearing, or how one looks like in general. “You should’ve seen how I looked before I started here,” says Supay, a medical doctor in his late 30s. He grabs his waist as if to show how much fat he used to have around his belly, and then says that after starting at the Club a year earlier, he has lost almost 20lbs. Locutor overhears this and intervenes: “*dude* you were like a roasted pig, just not dark enough!”. Another person chimes in and says something about Supay being a womanizer and how Supay would never go for a run earlier than 8am since nobody would be on the streets to *see* him. At that point Karen walks in and, as usual, asks what everybody is laughing about. Supay is the quickest to answer and says that we are talking about how Locu’s success with women correlates with his fat percentage, and that as of late, he has been getting thinner and thinner. Karen, who is notorious for speaking in high decibels, laughs and yells that Locu could compensate for his boniness with trying to get some sun, that if he were *negro* like Karen, women would flock around him. “But he is a *negro!*”, Supay responds and then fraternally grabs Locu by the back of his neck and says that “this *negro* needs to seriously eat some roasted pork” or otherwise there will never be anything in his body for ladies to grab.

Within the sporting field in the Club, members hold a license to tease each other regarding their extra kilos or the lack thereof; their skin tone, size of their arms or thighs, etc. Used to seeing each other in sweaty sports clothes and often in rather inelegant positions and situations, such as squatting in the gym or riding at full speed with snot all over one’s face, the



team members' familiarity with each other's bodies generates a sense of situated intimacy. The intimacy is situated for it emerges and stays within the sporting field and is, to an extent, tied to the physical place and what one is wearing. The banter that is built around that intimacy, in turn, further strengthens the team members' sense of belonging while also drawing the boundaries around the Club as a community, marking it as a space of inclusion and exclusion. As a newcomer, I also got a taste of this. I had been training with the team for four months before my peers finally started including me in their banter and turning me into their source of fun-making and ridiculing. I became the 'Nordic slum-dweller' (*villera nórdica*) for my intimate knowledge of Santiago's poorest neighborhoods, and the "white *criolla*" for my interest in Santiago's folklore. Once when everybody in the team had learnt about my investigative endeavors and no longer saw me as a threat of any sort but instead as part of the team, they started freely calling me "the spy."

Despite the omnipresent race and gender-related innuendos in the everyday gym banter, the joking also conceals deeper concerns that the athletes have with their bodies. To conform with societal expectations of what an athlete *should* look like is a source of preoccupation among most of my informants, even if those preoccupations are not directly expressed as such. Moreover, how an athlete in Santiago should look from a gendered and racialized perspective further increases the pressure. As an anthropologist, I felt often conflicted by my own research angle that was less concerned with the gendered dimension of the club than with that of race and class. As a woman, I had privileged access to learn more from females' perspective about the gendered-ness of a sport whose female participation even in the U.S. barely reaches 35% (USA Triathlon 2016) and in Argentina much less.<sup>63</sup> While I was aware of how gendered the world of

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<sup>63</sup> There are no official statistics on the gender division among Argentine triathletes. The country's federal association of triathlon has not conducted any demographic surveys. However, I regularly looked at (and talked

triathlon and also the club were, I nevertheless had my research focus on the race-class/status dimension of the club and thus knowingly paid less attention to gender as an analytical concept. That said, I recognize that an entire dissertation could be written about triathlon as a sport that (re)produces specific gender roles while defying others, and about the gender dynamics within the Ironsport Club, contextualized by a highly conservative, patriarchal society such as Santiago. But in this chapter, I limit my discussion on gender to merely pointing out some of the pressures that female athletes in the team face regarding their bodies, body work, and physical capital. An excerpt from my field notes speaks to some of these concerns, suggesting how different kinds of figures of prowess and beauty determine, in this case, preparations for a specific sporting event:

(October 2017)

*Karina and I are driving to the middle-distance national cup in Termas. We discuss (among many other things) the clothes we plan to wear, the tri suit that I had ended up picking from the three I was potentially lent, and whether we preferred one or two-piece suits. Karina tells me how Mario jokingly orders her to lose "that one tiny kilogram" she says she'll always carry. Karina is 42 years old, mother of two children, and by all accounts naturally beautiful: she doesn't need to make herself up but looks good as she is; she has the face and also the gaze of somebody who's been beyond Santiago. She laughs at Mario's demands, but then gets a bit more serious and acknowledges how important it is for her to feel that she looks good while she's racing –**especially** while she is racing–, and that how a one-piece suit tends to favor her more "because that way I can dissimulate my waistline chorizo" (porque así disimulo mis chorizos), she says and laughs. Again, she explains that it is basically impossible for her to get rid of her extra bit of belly, what she calls a permanent leftover of two pregnancies she'd had in her 30s. She doesn't seem too troubled by it.*

*Karina, Karen and I stay in the same room in Termas, in one of the huts the team collectively have rented by the race site. In the evening, we try out our suits and evaluate which look the best. We all agree unanimously with the choices each of us has already made. But still, there was that one more reassurance to be had -*

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about) race participant lists in different regional and national competitions to see that usually only 10-15% of the participants would be women. In short-distance races, the rate would be closer to 15% while in half and full ironman distances it would rarely reach 10%. I often brought this up in my conversations with Mario, who is committed to increasing women's participation in the sport. Women in the team also readily recognized how difficult it was to get women –in their words, especially women in Santiago– to participate in endurance sports in general. "It's cultural," I was often told.

*from others. We rant about our hair, talk about braids, wonder what to wear before the race starts; if there will be any bathrooms to change. So much conversation revolving around clothing! This is not a beauty pageant, but it definitely is a kind of exposé of athletic bodies carrying all possible insignia that support the fact that we are all athletes. The three of us agree that clothing can either complement or conceal our bodies, but that often, it doesn't do either.*

Karina comments her waistline and the kinds of racing suits that favor her body through jokes. But the comments contain deeper undercurrents of body consciousness which are also present in the conversations Karina, Karen and I share the evening before the race. Moreover, the comments and conversations reveal how Karina and Karen see the competition almost like an exhibition. This is the case with many competitive sports. But I wonder if the pressure to look good in a long triathlon race has also something specific to do with triathlon being such a male-dominated sport; a sport where the standard of an ideal body type is at once muscular but also very lean; where one should have a 'swimmer's back' (broad, muscular shoulders) and 'long-distance runner's legs' (with less muscle mass than, say, short-distance runners). So, where does this leave women amateur athletes, who by nature tend to have broader hips, slimmer shoulders, and a much higher body fat percentage than men? The prevalent (and potentially oppressive) ideals of beauty in triathlon are particularly difficult for women to adjust to –not because the ideals demand some kind of a de-feminization of one's body but because the ideal body type takes as its golden standard the *male* body.

Karen won the women's middle-distance race, thereby gaining important points in the National Championship Cup. Fifteen people from the team participated in the competition, which started at 7am on a Saturday morning. By 2pm,<sup>64</sup> everybody from the team was done. The two

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<sup>64</sup> 1800m swimming, 90km cycling and 21km running –a half marathon– in a bit over 5 hours for women athletes in the North-Western region is an excellent time. Nationally, the level can be a little higher, with women clocking times well below 5 hours.

cabins we had rented for all of us to stay at had a grill and by 3pm, there was a full *asado* (barbeque) in the making with enough meat to feed an army, and bread, salad, Gatorade, and Coke. Mario was preparing the *asado* while others were euphorically sharing race stories and speaking and yelling and laughing over each other's voices. When Mario started passing the meat on, Karen noted that she must have burnt so many calories during the race that if she did not eat the whole day, she would wake up next day at least two pounds lighter. This immediately sparked a wave of harsh jokes about weight loss, diets, etc. Then Mario came next to Karen, who he considers to be his adopted daughter, placed an enormous piece of meat on her plate and with his joking bluntness said: "*negra*, you're not a model; you're an athlete. Eat!"

### **Under surveillance; under construction**

The body of an athlete is a site of continuous surveillance, labor, and production. It is at once productive and subjected (Foucault 1979); a factory of sorts whose performance capacity is tied to the disciplinary regime by which it is run. For an athlete, the body is the instrument she at once works *with* and works *on*. The instrument is therefore never ready but always in transformation – a labor process that Loïc Wacquant calls "body work" (1995). In discussing a south-side Chicago boxing club and its boxers, Wacquant defines body work as:

Highly intensive and finely manipulated regulation of the organism whose aim is to imprint into the bodily schema of the fighter postural sets, patterns of movement, and subjective emotional-cognitive states that make him into a conversant practitioner of the sweet science of bruising.

For boxers and other athletes alike, body work implies endless repetitions of specific movements or exercises and, as in the case of endurance athletes, endless hours of e.g. running, swimming, or cycling. The mastery of these practices gradually shapes the body for the purpose of its instrumentalization. On an anatomical level, this implies growing muscle mass or increasing

anaerobic threshold, etc. In more sociological terms, body work is what enables the athlete to accumulate physical capital; that is, capital which is literally *embodied* and carried within one's muscles, nerve system, and cardiovascular fitness. Bourdieu argues (1978) that for professional athletes, the constant transformation of the body is essential to their chances of accumulating and improving their economic and social capital. By contrast, for those engaging in sports on an amateur level, the body serves more as a simple display of one's already existing capital (ibid). The body work involved in amateur sports therefore is not aimed at achieving more economic or social capital but rather at polishing the capital display site itself.

An athlete's physical capital is measured in terms of the athlete's performance and her physique's (and, depending on the discipline, the performance's) aesthetic value. While the aesthetic pressures may be different for women and men, their role in sport practices is significant, and especially powerful in how the athlete is perceived as by her surroundings. The social imaginaries of what an athlete ideally looks like –lean, muscular, young– are pervasive also among the athletes themselves, as the above-written ethnographic description shows. The athletes themselves understand just as well as the public how the athletic body may serve as status currency. As Stephen Poulson writes, “Highly trained athletes are most often regarded as physically beautiful, graceful, and competent. The public often consider them to be exemplary people, and to some degree, even exemplary citizens” (2016:16). While this may be particularly applicable to professional athletes whose presence in the (social)media may have a cult-like following, it also applies to amateurs who have adopted a given sport –especially a high-intensity/extreme sport– as part of their lifestyle (Wheaton 2004). One's lifestyle choices tend to speak of one's desires, passions, and dispositions, but also of one's socioeconomic standing and professional status –in short, of one's economic and cultural capital (Bourdieu 2010; Poulson

2016; Wheaton 2004). Building one's lifestyle around sports alone holds important societal value and the 'sporting body' serves as the proof of that lifestyle choice. Thus, the amateur athlete's physical capital becomes status currency, and indeed a way to display the cultural and economic capital one already possesses.

"If you had seen Pedro Simón when I first met him, 17 years ago, you wouldn't recognize him," Mario tells me in one of our interviews. He opens his arms to exaggerate Pedro's waist size while saying that "the dude was a fat beast" (*el chango era un gordo bestia*) who could hardly run around the block without losing his breath and looked 10 years older than he was. "Look at him now!" Pedro, Santiago's federal judge and now 52, does not appear his age.<sup>65</sup> Mario continues with his vivid description of how terrible Pedro looked like nearly twenty years ago, and then stops and says:

Triathlon is about dedication, it's all about discipline. I think in Pedro's world that matters even more than just how his body looks like...his colleagues, you know politicians and others –and I know a many of them!– probably see Pedro as this son of a bitch who has everything and who is *also* an athlete. And I know Pedro just loves it! It's like that with Benjamín and Karina and Agustín as well, or, you know, with most people in the team, you know them.

"And what if Pedro wasn't white?" I ask.

- What do you mean?
- I mean, what if Pedro wasn't white but was, I don't know, *criollo*.
- Well, he wouldn't be the federal judge! [laughs]
- Yeah, I know, but what I mean is, do you think it's like that with the *becados* as well, that looking athletic etc. makes you look different or, like, somehow better in the society?
- Look, if you're a *negro*, you're a *negro*, fit or not. People see your skin color before they look at your posture, that's just how it is. But I think the *becados* are in a different position because they represent the Club and because they're *real* athletes. You know, it's not about what they look like, it's about all the work they do and how they do it and I think that's something people value and respect, the body just shows it. Karen, you know, that's what she's done. ...I mean... [much laughter]she wants to be Lucy Charles<sup>66</sup> but she would have to bleach herself before that! But seriously, Karen wants people to see

<sup>65</sup> His youthful appearance may also have something to do with his visits to a men's beauty parlor in Buenos Aires where he regularly gets Botox treatment –an open secret among the team members.

<sup>66</sup> A British triathlete and current world champion.

that she works hard, although she could of course always work harder, but she really works. And that shows. And it also motivates other *becados*.

What Mario says about Pedro speaks of how the paying members intend to position themselves outside the matrix of being average or normal. *Not* being average affords them the kind of currency that both helps them maintain their social status and also serves as an asset in the power struggles within their social spaces. They have chosen as their lifestyle a sport that is highly goal oriented (I cannot think of a single triathlete who would simply train without intending to train for a race) and characterized by delayed gratification. This means that not only does the training itself require time and stamina, but the mentality necessary for the sport is in itself based on stamina. Thus, to be a “son of a bitch who has everything and is *also* an athlete” places the lifestyle athlete on a pedestal that stands above imaginaries of middle-class normalcy (Fletcher 2008).

In contrast to this, the *becados*’ struggle is about socioeconomic mobility built on the accrual of social status. When Mario mentions Karen, who wants to be like Lucy Charles, he also hints to the different positionality from where the *becados* arrive in their sports practice. The hard work in its volume may be the same as that of the middle-class members in the Club. Further, the results of performance development may also correlate between the Club’s different social groups. Yet the stakes in the process of physical capital accumulation are different. Karen’s story illustrates these stakes. While she arrived in triathlon “accidentally,” her mentality as an athlete from an economically deprived background is saturated by aspirations for socioeconomic ascent.

Six days a week, Karen, 24, wakes up at 5.30 in the morning and is training by 6 or 6.30. She usually trains around 10 times a week with one day off; that is, on most days, she trains in

the morning and then again in the evening. In terms of time, she estimates that she spends about 15-20 active hours a week on training, but that in reality, it's much more "because of all the social stuff, hanging out with people in the gym and Tannya, and so on." Having studied physical education, she works as a personal trainer at a gym (not Ironsport) and also as a teacher at an elementary school during the hours she does not train.<sup>67</sup> Karen, who is like a daughter to Mario and whom Mario calls "more *negra* than I" for Karen's dark complexion, was born into poverty in the city's periphery. Much like Mario, Karen, too, excelled at sports. Her career in sports started in the secondary school, when she was selected to Santiago's girl's field hockey team. She played with the team for a few years before getting interested in triathlon, at the age of 19.

I actually got into [triathlon] out of curiosity because I'd just started studying physical education and you know we were all the time in the pool and running. And then there was a race one day and a friend lent me her bike, so I tried it out, it was like a children's distance or something! But I liked it, I did pretty well. From there, through connections and coincidences, I came to Mario. I was so scared when I decided to ask him to be my coach, I had no idea how much he would charge but I knew I couldn't pay anything! But he basically sat me for a coffee, asked me about my family and what my parents do; what I wanted to do with my life, what I wanted to do for my family, I mean, nothing to do with triathlon!, and when I planned to graduate. I don't even remember what all I said, but after the coffee he said he'll start coaching me. When I asked him how much it would cost, he just said I didn't have to worry about it.<sup>68</sup>

Her athletic development has been formidable, and she currently ranks among the top 15 women in Argentina and top five in the Northwest. Succeeding in races and receiving due media attention has provided her opportunities to find small sponsorships. She then further strengthens the sponsor relations through an active social network life, namely her Instagram account. Her

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<sup>67</sup> As impossible as this may sound, it is explicable by the fact that just like many other school teachers in Santiago, Karen only teaches a couple of hours per day, usually from 10 or 11am until noon or 1pm. In the evenings, when she works with her personal trainees, she is able to make use of her time in the gym also for her own training purposes. Her income is meager but as she lives with her family, she can manage her expenses with her monthly salary.

<sup>68</sup> I asked Mario why he decided to start coaching Karen. He told me that he not only saw Karen's athletic promise but also sensed her determination and desire to work hard to become an athlete. After he had learnt more about Karen's background, it was obvious to him that she would enter the team as a *becada*.



Instagram pictures almost invariably depict her in training, wearing sports clothes, posing with other team members, or eating and rehydrating after workout. Whenever the photograph somehow relates to a sponsor, she mentions it in the image caption.

Karen's Instagram account has over 3000 followers and her pictures tend to attract flattering comments about her being "beautiful" and "strong." However, Karen is acutely aware of how important it is she presents herself as an *athlete* rather than "just" a pretty young woman who happens to do sports. Once during a long run, Karen and I were discussing discrimination in Santiago and how she has lived and felt it in her life. She told me about her parents' efforts to pay for her younger brother to go to a private school where he's having trouble for being called *negrito*;<sup>69</sup> how still some years back she would feel uncomfortable going to some cafés where the Club members would often go for being *negra* ("*por ser negra*"), and she said that as an athlete, she felt like she had to work twice as hard as any white person to maintain a positive public image of herself. "People *look* at me," she says with a mysterious emphasis on the verb 'to look,' leaving room for all kinds of gender- and race-based interpretations which we unfortunately do not delve into. At that moment, we come across another friend in the park and continue our run with him.

### **Discipline and approval**

Karen's meaningfully uttered phrase: "people *look* at me," harks back to Foucauldian analyses of the body, surveillance, and discipline in sports. Foucault's panopticon-theory has been applied in socio-spatial analyses on how and where athletes are being surveilled, e.g. the swimming pool (Rinehart 1998) or the boxing club (Wacquant 1995), and how the constant

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<sup>69</sup> *Negrito* is the diminutive form of *negro*.

surveillance affects the accumulation of physical capital (ibid.). Yet especially pertinent to the contemporary era, the surveillance of athletes' bodies also takes place in online social networks. The ongoing surveillance to which an athlete subjects her body forms part of the multi-dimensional regime of discipline that governs her body work. "Discipline," write Cole et al., "shapes and produces individuals through techniques of surveillance that reverberate through the social and individual bodies. Disciplinary matrices create 'docile bodies:' controlled, healthy, and regulated bodies, bodies whose training extends their capacity and usefulness" (2004:212). While Foucault conceptualized discipline as "physics, anatomy, or technology of power" (1979: 215), discipline is also a societally shared moral standard. In terms of an individual, self-discipline, in turn, acts as a personal value that at harshest, determines one's personal worth. It measures one's ability to willingly subject oneself to technologies of power for the purpose of productivity. In that sense, external surveillance (which one is both an active and passive object of) serves as a regulating force that furthers one's self-discipline and also constantly evaluates the results –the production– of the self-disciplinary regime.

Self-discipline is not only integral to accumulating physical capital but also a value the surrounding society approves and rewards, and the athlete's body stands as a testament to it (Wacquant 1995). Karen, for whom it is utterly important that she is perceived by the public as an athlete, capitalizes on the idea of self-discipline and sacrifice successfully in her online self-representations. In one of her Instagram pictures, for example, she poses at a gym with a mate in her hand. The caption says: "0600hs @Ironsport Premium." Another Instagram picture is a selfie on an early Sunday morning with Mario when they have gone to cycle and has the caption: *mientras el mundo se duerme, los triatletas entrenan* – "while the world sleeps, the triathletes train." The many comments her pictures receive vary from the usual "Beautiful!" and "I wish I

could do that too,” to more elaborate: “If we all worked like that there’d be no crisis in Argentina.” Karen, perhaps sometimes without even realizing it, does not simply expose her physical capital, i.e. how fit she is, to her social media followers, but goes further and shows what it takes to achieve and accumulate it. In so doing, she taps into some of the core values that orient hegemonic understandings of success and shared ideas of social status. To portray herself as a disciplined athlete provides her social legitimacy, which, if she were “just a fit *negra* with a pretty face,” as she says, she would not get very easily. That social legitimacy, coupled of course with her athletic success, attracts other people in the gym and the Club and even among potential sponsors (usually local entrepreneurs). By posing with Karen in her Instagram pictures for wider publics, or simply by training and interacting with her in the Club’s sporting field, other team members revalidate their own ideas of success. Further, seeing themselves as part of or participating in Karen’s (or other *becados*’) success, enables them to see themselves as athletic ambassadors of self-discipline, sacrifice, dedication, etc. – that is, principle values that define middle-class ideologies of progress, legitimacy, and success (Bourdieu 2010; Ehrenreich 1989; Lareau 2003). The hard work that goes into the making of an athletic body –all the accumulating physical capital– thus leads to capital exchanges in the sporting field. It buttresses the young professional athlete’s sense of agency and strengthens her social status, which in turn may open new contacts and opportunities within that same sporting field or beyond. At the same time, it allows the amateurs to reaffirm their own social status through their support for an athlete who represents the values they deem fundamentally important.

### Entrepreneurial athletes

“Mauri’s problem is that his legs are crooked,” says Monica, Mauri’s mother. Mario stands next to her nodding and agreeing: “yeah, his legs are really crooked. But it’s fine, he’ll still do well.” I am trying to see where Mauri is to find out whether his legs are as crooked as Monica and Mario say, but Mauri has already disappeared into the crowd. It is a Sunday morning in the Park where Ironsport has organized a one-day triathlon workshop/event for kids and adolescents to raise awareness of the sport and attract newcomers to the club. Ideally, Mario would like to set up a separate sub-18 triathlon training group and the workshop is the first step towards seeing whether it could happen. Mauri, who is 16, is working in the workshop as a general do-everything person. The previous day, I had agreed with him that he can keep my bicycle once I go back to the States. This serves as a pretext for a conversation with Monica whom until then I had met only once. I am curious to hear from Monica what she thinks about Mauri’s being a *becado* at Ironsport. She repeats (and repeats it many times) how wonderful it is that Mauri has joined the team. When I ask her to explain this further, she first talks about health and exercise and how important it is for the young to have activities in their lives that keep them engaged and out of trouble. Mauri’s family lives in a poor neighborhood in the north of the city and just as many other neighborhoods of similar socioeconomic profile, theirs, too, is rife with crime and drugs. Monica works from home as an unlicensed pet groomer; Hernán, Mauri’s father, has a job as a clerk in a pharmacy. They have two other sons: the eldest is studying chemical engineering in Tucuman and the youngest is still in the primary school. I am somewhat surprised to hear that Mauri goes to a private school. Monica notices my surprise and openly explains how their single goal as a family is to provide best possible education to all their sons,

and that it requires an enormous sacrifice, but somehow, they are managing it. There is just absolutely nothing extra, which is why Mauri's being a *becado* is such a wonderful thing.

Then she says: "I think the best part of being in the team is the other people Mauri gets to mingle with." She continues to explain how Mauri can "absorb influences" from the other team members who are, "you know, middle-class," and how those influences will help him to build himself an easier life. "But the boy must study," she sternly adds. That, too, relates to being a *becado*: in two years, Mauri will start in the university in Santiago –he wants to study law, Monica proudly says. If all goes as planned, Ironsport will continue to sponsor him, thereby alleviating the family's economic pressures. Then Monica starts talking again about the other people in the club and draws a parallel between the team and the private school Mauri goes to. According to her, private school pupils share the mentality of studiousness and do not wonder *whether* to go to a university but to *which* university they will go. She knows that most people in the club have university degrees and good jobs. Therefore, Mauri's double exposure to educational ambitions, at his school on one hand and in the club on the other, must have a positive impact on "what the boy wants to do with his life."

Some days later, I bring up Monica's comments about the club in an interview with Mario and ask what he has to say about them. He immediately gets enthusiastic:

See, that's the revolution! That's what Ironsport is about, it's about social inclusion, that's the revolution! If we can make Locutors and Mauris and Karens and others see themselves as persons who can transform their lives, then they can also transform this society. You know last night I met with Bolzón and Fochi<sup>70</sup>, and I suggested to Bolzón it would be great if we could send some of the *becados* to one of the young entrepreneur events, because really it's about the same thing, about being an entrepreneur of oneself [*emprendedor de uno mismo*], whether

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<sup>70</sup> Javier Bolzón is the owner of one of the largest logistics companies in the Northwest and a member of Ironsport. He also collaborates as a consultant for a federal program called "Young Entrepreneurs," which organizes monthly or bi-monthly events, workshops, and conferences in Santiago (and other provinces in the country). Alejandro Fochi is a wealthy businessman who is also beginning to find ways to establish business collaboration with Ironsport's *becados* program.

you're an athlete or you have a startup. And Ironsport makes these people into entrepreneurs of the kind they want to be, by showing that it is possible. Mauri, for instance, he's got attitude and I think being in the Club is going to be great for him, he's got talent. ...yeah, he's crooked, but it's not like he's anyways going to become Jan Frodeno<sup>71</sup>, he'll compete for now and then he'll keep on doing sports, hopefully triathlons of course. But really, *really*, the kid will study and what he sees and learns in the Club he'll pass onto others.

I challenge Mario: "Isn't that a bit optimistic? I mean, just because you're a *becado* at Ironsport doesn't mean you'll necessary get some great social consciousness and turn into a social revolutionary. People can be greedy and definitively egoistic." I get a rather condescending response:

*Of course* people are egoistic. And just because I always talk about revolution doesn't mean that I don't know how terrible people and their lives can be, you should know that. But I tell you, if somebody like Fochi is coming around to collaborating in some way with the *becado* program, then that justifies my optimism [laughter]. Next time we have an *asado*, I'll invite Mauri as well, I think it'll be good for him to hang out with us outside the gym.

I have argued that in the Club, its members' different social fields overlap and create a shared sporting field in which paying members and the *becados* conduct their body work and accumulate physical capital and negotiate other capital transactions among each other. Mutual assistance, contacts, business deals (i.e. buying and selling equipment) and also relations of affect are all in circulation in the different sites where the Club's sporting field comes into being, be it in the gym or one of the bicycle routes. In the sporting field, the athlete's body is the athlete's enterprise, which, if "properly managed, is capable of producing more value than was 'sunk in' it" (Wacquant 1995:67). Yet more than simply an enterprise with an aim to become stronger, faster, or leaner, the athlete's body as an entrepreneurial project embodies a whole value system that correlates with widely shared understandings of how to achieve socioeconomic

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<sup>71</sup> Full-distance triathlon World Championship winner 2016.

success: self-discipline, dedication and devotion, sacrifice, etc. Thus, while the Club's sporting field demarcates an area where its agents engage in specific body work and sports practice, it also potentiates the accumulating bodily capital as currency for acquiring social and economic capital. This second sense enables the sporting field to extend itself beyond the sites where the team members conduct their training, such as *asados*, the quintessential Argentine get-togethers.

Almost all the team *asados* that I attended were organized at Agustín Soria's house, a small mansion surrounded by a stone wall at least eight feet tall. In a typical residential fashion, the house has a back yard with a pool and on the other side the yard, there is a *quincho* – a covered area for *asados* with an enormous grill and a large table and chairs. Agustín, 50, lives in the house with his wife Lucrecia, 47, a diabetologist and also a triathlete. Their two daughters are both studying in a university in Córdoba, five hours from Santiago. Agustín's family originates from Spain where his great-grandfather had been a wealthy landowner. He never told me why his great-grandparents had migrated to Argentina. But what was obvious in his narratives is that they had maintained their wealth as they started a new life on the new continent. Agustín has known Mario for 15 years and was among the first members of Ironsport. Agustín owns an upscale restaurant, La Ley, in the city center and the National University's canteen, Bar UNSE, where he usually goes after training in the morning and stays until siesta. Since I myself would go to UNSE three days a week, I would often say hi to Agustín in his canteen and sometimes have a coffee with him. It is there that the *becados* may eat every day the canteen's lunch menu. Further, some of the *becados*, for instance Locutor, have also worked in the canteen as waiters or in the kitchen. In terms of the *becado* program at Ironsport, Agustín is a key player whose business benefits the *becados*. At the same time his business benefits from the positive reputation

that La Ley and Bar UNSE get through sponsoring different sports events (usually in connection with Ironsport).

That evening there are 12 of us at Agustín's. There is no specific reason for the *asado* except Benjamin's comment a couple of days earlier that he felt he had not been eating enough protein. Mario, who always prepares the *asado* but never hosts it, has invited Mauricio to join. The other *becados* include Locutor, Nery (who is also a coach), Wil, and Karen. Mauri is feeling seemingly out-of-place but Mario quickly starts drawing him into the banter, making fun of his crooked legs and getting everybody else to make fun of him as well, and soon enough he seems to relax a little. As the meat starts getting ready and is passed around the table, the conversation starts following a pattern I have detected in other similar get-togethers: from discussing general affairs in Santiago's sports and triathlon scene to sharing some recent training or race experiences and finally reminiscing about legendary race trips that the team members have done together over the course of the years they have known each other. Pictures and videos on phones are used to prove the veracity of some preposterous-sounding statements, further fueling the storytelling. Such narratives do not only revolve around past and shared experiences, but they also translate into collectively understood rhetorical devices (cf. Appadurai 1996) which the participants in the conversation use to reassert and confirm their membership in a given social group. Thereby they also draw the boundaries between different social groups: although the *becados* laugh along, mostly their participation in the conversation is passive. Stories of disastrous hotel experiences at an Ironman race in Florida or missed flights on a race trip in Brazil are not the kinds of stories the *becados* can contribute to, let alone compare with their own. For often in such show-and-tell situations the shared recounting also conceals a competition



of ‘who has had it the worst’ or ‘who has it the most difficult’ within the fantasy-like context of a trip to a tropical paradise.

Locutor, however, does not stop asking questions: “What airline did you fly with?”, “How was the food in the hotel?”; “How was the room like?”. It is possible he has heard the same ‘battle stories’ many times already yet he does not seem to get tired of listening to them again. Like a sponge, he seems to absorb the anecdotal imagery in the guests’ accounts and turn it into his own imaginary habitat. Locutor, who has one year left in the *Profesorado* before he graduates as a PE teacher, is dreaming about travelling to Europe on his own, and has been saving money for the trip for a couple of years.<sup>72</sup> Everybody likes Locutor –and not only because of his jovial, witty character but also because he is very skilled with bicycles and helps anybody in the team whenever necessary with any minor technical issues, besides almost always leading the pack while cycling (and thus breaking the wind). He is incredibly resourceful and entrepreneurial, and as his most recent project, he has started to prepare energy bars in his kitchen with two of his classmates and sell them in the different Ironsport gyms. It is a common joke among the team members that nobody has absolutely any clue what is in Locutor’s recipe and that it is probably better not to know it. In the *asado* at Agustín’s, the joke comes up again. Locutor responds that given how little he is asking for a bar –20 pesos (then \$0,60; generally, in Santiago they cost twice as much)–, nobody should complain about whether they know or not what is in it. Benjamín, the young hedge fund owner who had complained about not eating enough protein, nods acceptingly.

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<sup>72</sup>Locutor was finally able to travel to Europe in April 2018, though with a budget that demanded more basic survival skills than offered opportunities for care-free tourism. During the three months, he couch-surfed his way around the continent.

“I’d like to do something like what Mario does,” Locutor tells me when in an interview I ask what he would like to do once he graduates. “You know, I know where he comes from, he’s told me and I understand it, I know his story and it’s like my own – except that I am nowhere near to where he is now!”, and he laughs self-deprecatingly.

- What do you mean by “something like what Mario does”?
- Well, uhm, you know he is rich but he lives like a poor person, you know how simple his life is, but he has a lot of money. And I think that’s also something people respect about him, that he’s not showing off even though he is *the Mario Diaz*, and I think that’s quite cool. I know I will have to study more after this *profesorado* because...uhm, you don’t do much with a degree from there, I mean unless you just want to teach at some school. So I might study what Mario did, sport sciences at the University of Catamarca, but let’s see. The thing is, there aren’t opportunities here and now that the economy has started to go down, who knows what’s going to happen, so really, I’d like to move away for some time, work abroad, do something different. Like Mario, when he went to Italy and then Venezuela... There’s this cycling team in Barcelona, Agustín knows the coach and has given me his contact, because maybe I could train with them and even work there a bit when I go to Europe, that would be ideal. I mean not just because of the sport, but because that’s the kind of experience you need to become somebody here, you can’t just sit and wait for things to happen. Nothing here just happens; nothing happens here! (laughter).

In our conversations, especially when we discuss his ideas of his future and his aspirations, Locutor often starts his sentences with “like Pedro/Agu/Mura/Karina says...” or remarks on what he has heard or learnt from others in the team. He is very frank about how much he enjoys the exposure to “the world beyond Santiago” that he feels he gets through the other team members. He is also articulate about expressing why it is important for him.

You can watch Netflix and learn something about other places and maybe that is all most people in my position ever learn, you know, without any possibilities to leave this place. But I can actually talk to somebody like Karina or Agu, or even you, and it’s very different...honestly, when I hang out with Mario for instance, I feel like the things I want are actually possible to get, he’s done it too, and then I hang out with the others when we train together and you know, we mostly shoot the shit (*hablamos macana*) all the time, but still, I learn.

Mario, often taking up a paternal role with Locutor (in fact, Locutor usually calls Mario his *viejo* – old man), says that Locutor is an “innate entrepreneur” (*emprendedor nato*) –others in the team have repeated this as well. While Locutor’s current primary life goal is to travel to Europe, it is evident that his general life ambitions are not limited to globe-trotting. He participates regularly in the Young Entrepreneurs events, where he says he has learnt about startups, social networking, and product-marketing. His current business endeavor in his kitchen is likely not to be his only one. Moreover, he is convinced that in the future, once he will have finished his studies –“all of them,” as he says–, he will run a business that combines sports and ‘human services’ (*servicios humanos*) and whose ethos and model take after Ironsport.

### **The lifestyle entrepreneur**

Locutor’s entrepreneurial attitude reflects in his incessant long-term projections in terms of his professional and athletic career, and continuous musings about how he would like to live his life. Karen’s aspirations, on the contrary, are more present-oriented and materialistic. Her search of and strive for a lifestyle she associates with athletic success reflects in her ability to mobilize herself among potential sponsors and forge contacts that may further her career goals. As I have described earlier, her mastery of positive self-promotion through online social networks does not only attract followers among those who admire or look up to her athletic project (and also her physical attractiveness), but also among those who *approve* of how she manages it and the intrinsic values embedded in her athletic project that she manifests and professes. She embraces her own athletic entrepreneurialism to a point that it is hard to imagine who Karen Pereyra is beyond Karen Pereyra the triathlete. As Karen the triathlete, not only do

career-related opportunities open up for her but also access to social fields *beyond* the sporting field in which she is most at ease.

The first time I see Karen wearing something other than colorful sports clothes is an evening when she, Karina, myself, and a couple of others from the Club have gone out for a dinner at a restaurant close to the *Premium*. She is wearing tight trousers that she claims, laughingly and with a degree of pride, are almost too tight to accommodate her thigh muscles. While we order, Karina reveals that her husband has bought them tickets to go to Punta del Este in Uruguay for her birthday, which is where Karen will compete in a few months in a middle-distance triathlon race. The race is part of the Ironman franchise series and her goal is to qualify for the middle-distance Ironman world championships in South Africa in 2018. She is busy trying to secure money for her travels and has marshalled me as her personal travel agency responsible for finding her cheap tickets and cheap accommodation which she hopes to pay with sponsor money. The task is not the easiest since Punta del Este is one of the most expensive holiday destinations in the Southern Cone. Karina, who tends to see Karen as her adopted child, tells her about places to go to and things to do in Punta del Este. Despite (or perhaps precisely because of) being wealthy, Karina is conscious of the gaping socioeconomic difference between herself and the *becados*. She rarely fails to take this into account in her interactions with Karen and readily acknowledges her position of privilege regarding her lifestyle. But Karina also shares Mario's ideology (and his revolution). She does her best to help Karen and other *becados* close to her to carve out for themselves a space in the world that offers them mobility beyond the confines of the social conditions they come from. In the interactions between Karen and Karina I observe during the dinner, the sporting field unfolds as a balancing act between two different social spaces, framed by ideas of consumption. Discussions on shopping revolve around

shopping for sports clothes (Karen would like to buy a new triathlon suite for the race and Karina knows somebody in Buenos Aires who fabricates sports clothing – Karen could get a discount). On the other hand, Karina also tells Karen about bars in Punta del Este where, for a decent price (I am not sure what that means but neither do I realize to ask), one can try fancy cocktails. Jokingly and with a degree of self-sarcasm, Karen responds that in her neighborhood, people drink moonshine. For the most part, the dialogue is vertical: Karina tells Karen about things she should and could do, and Karen listens. Simultaneously, Karen aspires for that verticality to eventually slant as she wishes (and also plans) to experience the things that Karina tells her about; things that Karen deem as important markers of social status. Still, Karen's occasional self-ironic or even self-deprecating responses speak of her struggles with how she positions herself vis-a-vis Karina or others of similar socioeconomic standing. Is it a form of self-protection; a buffer in case people expect too much of her in terms of her sports performance and, as she would see it, her social status? Or is it about agreeing with everything she hears (from Karina) and mocking her own background to emphasize how far she gone from there? Or, could it be about subtle forms of resistance; a reminder to her interlocutor (Karina) that she has street credibility of different kind than who she interacting with? I ask myself these questions as we leave the restaurant.

I walk with Karen from the restaurant to the center where she has parked her motorcycle. I mention to her it was the first time we had hung out outside the Club's usual sites and in line with my research, I ask her how she feels about going out on *Roca*, Santiago's main street for (fancy) bars and restaurants, which is where our restaurant is also located. She keeps quiet for a second and then says that earlier, she would have never gone out there. For one, she would have never had the money –not that she has it now either, but she knows she usually does not have to

pay for her orders because those who invite her also pay for her. Second, she admits that earlier she would have felt uncomfortable. Laughing, she says that people in those places would have seen her and thought – what is this *negra* doing here. She is acutely aware of the invisible frontiers that divide different social spaces within the city. I can sense that still, going out on Roca dressed as somebody else than “Karen the triathlete” in colorful sports clothes is not something she takes for granted.

Writing about lifestyle sports, Belinda Wheaton discusses their intimate relationship to the construction of flexible and mobile identities, relating it to the late capitalist and neoliberal world order and the onset of mass consumption (2004). However, given the associations and studied correlations between lifestyle sports and professional middle classes (Fletcher 2008 Poulson 2016, Tulle 2008), the fluidity of these identities tends to be regulated by a unifying social field where consumption, symbolic markers of distinction, and physical practices (e.g. sports) determine the agents’ mobile self-identifications. Following this, some scholars posit that lifestyle identities have eclipsed class as determining factor in the construction of one’s subjectivity (Bocock 1993; Hall & DuGay 1996; Wheaton 2004). The case of the Club places this argument in question. Triathlon as a lifestyle provides the Club’s paying members a realm of self-realization where everything from the accumulation of bodily capital to the related consumption practices (equipment, clothing, travels) buttresses their identities as athletes. And in their case, while their class position and social status are firmly sutured onto their ‘triathlete’s skin,’ the primacy of their identity as triathletes, within and beyond the sporting field, connotes their class position rather than being determined by it (Bourdieu 1978). For the *becados*, however, being a triathlete enables them to start aspiring for social mobility and social status that is not solely reducible to their athlete-ness. This is not to suggest that the *becados* would not self-

identify first and foremost as athletes –on the contrary. Yet unlike with the team’s middle-class members, the strive for socioeconomic mobility undergirds the *becados*’ athletic subjectivities. It speaks of flexibility with their class identities and the vertical directionality of those identities – e.g. when shifting from their domestic domains to restaurants on La Roca and *asados* in the city’s most affluent neighborhoods.

## Conclusion

“Why do you do this?”, I ask Karen one afternoon as we are riding far outside the city, having already trained that morning in the gym. Her immediate response is a simple “because I like it.” But as I press her on the question of *why* she likes it, she becomes a little more pensive and then says that she is competitive and likes winning, and in a place like Santiago, that makes her feel respected and important. She seems to imply that her sport could be any sport in so far as it is something she succeeds in, and I say this to her. She disagrees. “You don’t have to be crazy to play field hockey or soccer; if anything, it’s normal and expected. But you have to be a crazy to do middle-distance triathlons.” She continues by saying that to race in long-distance triathlons, one has to be seriously fit and that confers another degree difference on those who engage in the discipline. For Karen, being a triathlete constitutes a pivotal part of her sense of self. At the same time, it is her primary bridge towards status building in Santiago where racial and socioeconomic class divisions would otherwise place her in the society’s margins. The Club’s sporting field facilitates that status building through the ongoing body work and accumulating bodily capital, which, in turn, allow her to capitalize on her successful athlete’s status beyond the Club. Karen’s aspirations concretize as she fluidly moves between and navigates different physical sites and social spaces and the capital transactions that take place in them.

In this chapter, I have argued that the Club constitutes a sporting field in which its members' different social spaces coalesce, generating an emergent field of social inclusion for agents from different socioeconomic sectors. Premised on a shared passion and interests and, moreover, a continuous body work and accumulation of physical capital, that sporting field materializes in concrete places, such as the gym or the track. In these places, the team members' shared training sessions and the body work demarcate the field's boundaries while their interactions structure the field from within. Bodily capital converts into currency to establish social contacts and to build networks; to forge relationships of trust and affect, and to exchange favors. Further, for the *becados*, the social capital they accrue within the sporting field opens other, perhaps even unexpected avenues towards exploring lifestyle decisions, consumption practices, and educational and professional influences they might otherwise not have access to.

The application of the (athletic) body as an instrument for social status building necessitates incessant work, self-discipline, and time-dedication. These are qualities pertaining to larger societal value systems that undergird hegemonic, 'middle-class' understandings of the meaning of success. In Robert Fletcher's words,

Self-discipline, self-reliance, and deferral of gratification are all required to compel one to endure the deprivation necessary to attain long-term success. For the [professional middle classes], this success is defined not through the achievement of any particular goal but rather through the process of goal achievement itself, compelling continual progress from achievement to achievement throughout one's lifetime (2008:318).

If equating these constituents of success with entrepreneurial characteristics, the *becados* can be conceived of as athletic entrepreneurs whose body is their enterprise; a highly regulated, dynamic and malleable site of performance and production. Potentiated by the results the body work generates, their accumulating physical capital bestows on them a sense of agency they



mobilize within the sporting field and use for capital transactions – namely, the accrual of social capital. This physical entrepreneurialism applies to the Club’s paying members as well. Their bodies, too, are like enterprises displaying the accumulating physical capital which, through its aesthetic and performance-related qualities, earns them admiration (or envy) and contributes to their status as successful professionals. It orients their consumption behavior and defines their ideas of health and wellbeing, all packaged as what they deem their lifestyle.

The interactions the *becados* have with the Club’s paying members in the sporting field harbor opportunities for absorbing cultural influences and references of lifestyles associated with socioeconomic upward mobility. Imaginaries of travels, places of consumption, and situated social behaviors the *becados* imbibe in their conversations and banter with others in the Club feed into their imagination and both fortify and validate their aspirations. The contacts they establish through the intra-Club networks recast those imaginations and aspirations as attainable possibilities: social mobility therefore ceases to be a mere abstraction and becomes associated with the Club’s sporting field and the practices that take place within it.

## Chapter 4: Between aspirations and progress: entrepreneurialism in a women's cooperative

### Introduction

Teresa's no-nonsense attitude shone through her demeanor the first time I met her. I was giving a class in Santiago's National University (UNSE) for a group of students enrolled in an associate degree program called *Educación Intercultural Bilingüe* (Bilingual intercultural education). The course was on research methods for their final projects due at the end of the school year, December 2017. I met the group for the first time in April 2017, a month after classes had begun. After I introduced myself and told the group what I was doing in UNSE, I told them about my research on class mobility, entrepreneurialism, and race, and more specifically on the processes of socioeconomic mobility among mixed-race Santiagueños. When the class ended, Teresa, a student in the class, came to me with two other students—all women in their 40s and 50s—and expressed her interest in my dissertation project. Speaking for the others as well, she started to talk about Santiago's racial discrimination, and how, when growing up, they all had felt it. Because, as she announced, "*nosotras somos cabecita negras!*" (We are *cabecita negras!*)<sup>73</sup> Then she laughed with a loud, enthusiastic and heartfelt laughter which I later discovered to be one of her primary characteristics. Teresa was less than 5 feet tall and almost as wide. Her presence in the classroom radiated leadership. She was outspoken and sincere, and as she announced to me her own racial identification, using the word *mestiza*, her voice and stern gaze carried a sense of defiance I was immediately intrigued by. When a couple

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<sup>73</sup> *Cabecita negra*, literally meaning little black head, is a name given to the predominantly dark-skinned northern Argentines in the 1940s. As Juan Domingo Peron became the president of Argentina in 1945, waves of migrants from the northern regions of the country started arriving in Buenos Aires both in support of the Peronist movement and also in search of jobs. These Northern migrants were pejoratively labeled as *cabecita negras* by the those living in Buenos Aires.

of days later we had a coffee at UNSE's canteen, she told me she was the president of a local cooperative. I was not surprised. Her stories of her work at the cooperative she presides over captured my curiosity and I told her I would like to know more about it. She invited me to visit. Two weeks later I went to the cooperative's workshop, at that point still unaware of having discovered a new ethnographic site where I would end up conducting fieldwork for the next seven months.



This chapter discusses the workings of *La Cooperativa Integral de Santiago del Estero*, which I will refer to as the cooperative/coop. The cooperative specializes in the production of wooden handicrafts, including seasonal home decorations, photo frames, jewelry boxes, napkin holders, etc. Although there is no rule excluding men from joining, the cooperative has been run by women since its foundation in 2012. The few men that have worked there have not stayed for too long. I once asked a couple of women why they thought men were not so keen on staying, or

even joining the coop. They answered that perhaps men felt it a little threatening to work with so many women, especially since the women had learnt to do carpentry –work that is traditionally associated with men. To me, this sounded like a fair reason and after that conversation, the topic rarely came up again. The cooperative was founded under the aegis of *Argentina Trabaja* (“Argentina Works”). *Argentina Trabaja* was a federal program aiming to integrate the society’s most vulnerable sectors into formal labor markets and thus reduce unemployment and informal work.<sup>74</sup> Specifically, the program intended to facilitate the establishment of cooperatives that would operate in areas such as janitorial work, urban infrastructure maintenance, park maintenance, or artisanal production. I will discuss *Argentina Trabaja* and the institutional context for the cooperative in more detail in a different section in this chapter. Here it suffices to say that the federal program provided the cooperatives tools, facilities and training for their chosen field of work while also paying the members a monthly salary of 4000 pesos (200 US dollars in 2017).

Where the previous chapter focused on social mobility and race, the present chapter examines the relationship between entrepreneurialism and social mobility, and gender. The cooperative is a site where entrepreneurialism and cooperative business, and the building of social and economic capital coincide with gendered (material) production. In this chapter, I use the concept of social capital to imply the intra-group relationships of trust, friendship, and, in general, mutual support. In that sense, I side more with Robert Putnam’s definition of social capital than with Bourdieu’s. The important difference here is that the social capital the cooperative workers generate among themselves does not convert into currency in the agents’ struggles within the social space they occupy or struggles over their class habitus (as Bourdieu

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<sup>74</sup> I use the past tense because since 2018, the current government has introduced considerable changes to the original *Argentina Trabaja* program and renamed it as *Hacemos Futuro* (We Make Future).

would have it). Instead, the relatively insular context of shared economic production serves more as a platform for social *support* as the women work towards self-empowerment. Thus, in contrast with Ironsport, where social capital has high transactional value and is directly convertible into status currency, in the cooperative, that capital is collectively owned and rests on *cooperation*. Although my conversations with Teresa and her colleagues began through my interest in social mobility and race, in the cooperative the question of race gradually became less pronounced. The cooperative members are almost exclusively mixed-race and typically self-identify as *criollas* and *mezclas*. Yet as I spent more time with them, it became apparent that their racial identifications had much less relevance in the context of their work than its gendered-ness. Perhaps this was due to *Argentina Trabaja* program being intended for people who were not only unemployed (in the official sense – many had informal jobs besides the coop work) but generally from low socioeconomic classes. Especially in Santiago, such a class position usually means being and self-identifying as racially something other than white. What the site did reveal was a fascinating landscape of intersections between social mobility, entrepreneurship, gender-specific cooperativism, and masculine line of work (carpentry). It also offered glimpses on the women's lives as spouses, mothers, and daughters, and how they negotiate their entrepreneurial work with their family lives in a cultural context governed by patriarchal norms and societal structures. I was able to find these glimpses primarily in my informants' discourse as it was only with few who I spent time with outside the cooperative and got to meet their families. Instead of focusing only on race, it made sense to redirect my ethnographic inquires on the conspicuous gender-related issues while not losing from sight the overarching issues of cooperative entrepreneurialism and social and economic capital. The following pages, then, do not only analyze the cooperative as a socioeconomic enterprise and problematize traditional neoliberal

understandings of entrepreneurialism. They also discuss how the workers navigate different kinds of labor markets within and outside the framework of cooperative entrepreneurialism.

While the site serves as a window on how specifically women construct their sense of self as entrepreneurs, it also shows how women cooperative workers benefit from the social capital they generate among each other within their shared social field. The connections, mutual trust, and even friendships forged within the cooperative serve as a base for maximizing the potential of a collective to produce economic revenue. Building social capital therefore extends horizontally among the workers whose socioeconomic profile is mostly similar. In that regard, the cooperative stands in juxtaposition to Ironsport. At Ironsport, the *becados* –the sponsored young athletes–, acquire social capital within a sporting field they share with people who socially, economically, racially represent a different world. In that sense, contrary to the horizontality of the social capital shared in the cooperative, at Ironsport, the conduit of that capital between the *becados* and others is vertical. The radically different worlds where Ironsport’s members reside partly overlap within the sporting field of the triathlon team. In the cooperative, on the contrary, the members inhabit the same social field within and outside their place of work. That said, I argue that in both social environments –in the sporting field at Ironsport triathlon club and in the cooperative’s workshop– the participating agents engage in similar identity processes. They work towards attaining a sense and an experience of social mobility determined by success, whether athletic or economic. Both sites, the triathlon team and the cooperative, serve as aspirational spaces that harbor the promise of success and respect. And in each context, the agents continuously endeavor to empower themselves in ways that allow them to conceive of themselves as entrepreneurs.

The collectively orchestrated economic production offers the cooperative members a sense of belonging that boosts their self-identification as savvy entrepreneurs. Yet some of the women also willingly confess that cooperative membership is simply a steppingstone towards improving their economic position rather than a career goal in itself. As I will show, in these cases the cooperative has served –and continues to serve– as an incubator for the women’s own (or familial) entrepreneurship; that is, starting their own businesses, such as a bakery or a vegetable store. For others, working in the cooperative implies inhabiting primarily the formal and regulated labor markets instead of having informal jobs such as in domestic employment. The cooperative therefore carries important representational and symbolic value beyond the (marginal) economic gains it provides.

### **Chapter structure**

I begin this chapter by introducing the cooperative, its members, and history, and by explaining how I started conducting ethnographic work there. In the second section, I discuss the larger political and institutional forces that framed the birth of *Argentina Trabaja*. In that context, I examine the effectiveness of the program through both my informants’ accounts and the academic literature written on the topic. The third section analyzes the concept of cooperative entrepreneurialism. In a business-oriented world, entrepreneurship implies engaging in profit-seeking activities. The scope of entrepreneurialism, in turn, is wider. It does not only entail setting up a business, but also having a future-oriented, risk-taking, and resilient attitude towards life; an enterprising way of being and an entrepreneurial sense of self. In today’s neoliberal ethos, being an entrepreneur, entrepreneurial, or practicing entrepreneurialism implies a whole host of practices, attitudes, and dispositions. One may be a daring and innovative start-up

aspirant or embrace self-care and physical wellness by turning her body into her ‘enterprise’ and yet in both scenarios, one can self-identify as entrepreneurial. Thus, the concept of entrepreneurialism presents itself as more flexible and malleable and applicable in a context that promotes ‘social economy,’ such as cooperative business.<sup>75</sup> Self-identification as an entrepreneur becomes particularly salient among the women who have worked in the informal sector, mostly as domestic employees. In the fourth section I examine what it means to shift from working directly for and depending on an employer –i.e. *somebody* instead of, say, an institution– to working for oneself is significant. About half of the coop women must still supplement their income with extra informal work. However, their answer to the question of “how do you identify yourself professionally?” is invariably something other than “I am a domestic employee.” Instead, the array of answers would include “I am an artisan,” “a cooperative member,” and often enough, “an entrepreneur.”

The fifth part of this chapter analyzes the cooperative as a platform for social mobility and what the cooperative members understand as *progress*. I discuss the women’s professional, educational, and economic aspirations. The women’s narratives highlight the possibilities that the cooperative and its institutional framework can potentially offer. While participation in professionalization courses by *Argentina Trabaja* is mandatory (and often seen as a necessary evil), the courses do provide tools for the women to design future plans beyond the cooperative. The cooperative members also participate in the *Plataforma Emprender* -organized workshops.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Kirchnerist governments’ (2003-2015) economic ideology was labeled as “social economy,” i.e. the construction of economic markets that aim to meet social needs. During Kirchnerism, the national economy was built around objectives to further social inclusion, reduce unemployment, increase citizen participation in the public forums and level the polarization of wealth generated especially during the 1990’s heyday of neoliberal economic policies. Within the framework of social economy, the state increased public spending, established public aid programs and also fomented cooperative work through the program *Argentina Trabaja*.

<sup>76</sup> *Plataforma Emprender* is a privately funded program (which also receives public funding) set to foment entrepreneurship especially among young people who aspire to start their own business. I will provide more detailed explanation of it in the third section.



These workshops offer practical knowledge and information of diverse business practices for entrepreneurs who own or intend to create their own enterprise. The women in the cooperative who aspire to have their own business or have already started one view the workshops as an integral part of their “growth as entrepreneurs.” On the other hand, while aspirations for profit-oriented activities are common, some of the younger members (23-30 years) rather direct their ambitions towards higher education. The social recognition these women acquire through studying to become teachers or policewomen serves as a springboard for “progress” and, as some say, a “middle-class lifestyle.” In that light, I consider how the cooperative workers make sense of their professional status and link it with what they aspire to do or be in the future. This makes it possible to examine the cooperative as a nexus where the production of economic capital intersects with social and cultural capital.

The women narrate their entrepreneurial endeavors with pride. They weave those stories around overcoming financial struggles and helping their families deal with economic hardship, often mentioning how women are better in such affairs than men. In the sixth section I discuss the intersection between the masculine practice and production of woodwork and the feminine – and feminist– space in which that production takes place. For example, the ability to use wood cutting machines and lathes is obviously a necessary skill for the work they perform. Yet for those who have learnt and dare to use the machines, the skill is also an important source of self-respect that concretizes understandings of and claims for gender equality. Further, the genderedness of the site unfolds as the women saw, chisel, glue and paint pieces of plywood while chatting about their families or the families of the others. In this sense, I analyze the cooperative both as a site where the women navigate different gendered practices and as an environment of continuous production and performance of changing gendered identities.

### **Arriving in the Cooperativa Integral de Santiago del Estero**

I arrive at the workshop in the morning with Teresa, whom I have met at a bus stop halfway between her house and mine, just ten minutes from the cooperative. From the outside, the cooperative's workshop looks like a white-washed concrete building that could house anything from a rural health center to a school or a jail. The only indicator of the current purpose of the building is a sign outside that says: Ministry of social development, *Argentina Trabaja*. It would be an exaggeration to say the construction looks derelict. Yet it is quite obvious that resources to maintain it, let alone improve and embellish it, are scarce. The surrounding yard has no pavement and whatever vehicle one uses to get there must be left in the dusty area below the trees that border the yard. The neighborhood is widely considered as poor. It has, however, witnessed many infrastructural improvements over the last ten years, with paved streets and streetlights; a new community building, and a new, "latest generation" school (*de última generación*). The municipality has also developed the area's invisible infrastructure, such as power lines and a sewage system. Walking there feels safe.



The cooperative's workshop

The cooperative's workshop occupies only about a third of the building itself. "This place used to be like a junk yard and the room was in a horrible condition when we got it. It took us a couple of weeks just to clean it and fix everything that was broken, like the doors. And you should've seen the bathroom!", Teresa tells me as we enter. Now there are two large worktables that can both accommodate at least 10 people. All kinds of materials, from plywood to paints and tools, are piled along the walls in shelves and cupboards that the women have made. Light enters into the room from large windows on the longer side of the rectangular room. But the light is filtered through a layer of dirt and dust accumulated on the windowpanes, illuminating the space in a soft, dream-like manner. Without the ceiling lights, doing intricate painting work would be challenging even for those with excellent vision.



Twelve women are present that day, all immersed in their work. Some are using hand saws to shape wooden pieces for small napkin holders. Others are painting different kinds of objects that have already been assembled, such as small jewelry boxes. There is chatter and occasional laughter. But it is also clear that the women concentrate on their work and there seems to be no social obligation to participate in the conversation. Teresa introduces me very briefly to the workers and then takes me to see their woodwork machinery. I am impressed as we walk to a whole different building, a large industrial hall that has been divided into four separate spaces. Each segment is used by a different cooperative. I learn that the site is actually a large compound where five different cooperatives work independently, with little interaction among each other. They all work under the aegis of *Argentina Trabaja*. Teresa shows the heavy machines they have received from program and which most of the workers now know how to operate. A couple of the women are selecting wood boards to saw into smaller pieces and helping each other to lift the larger materials. We chat for a bit. One is called Nancy and the

other one Josefa. Having concluded the tour, Teresa and I walk back to the workshop with Josefa. Mate is passed around the table accompanied by the rapidly disappearing pastries I had brought. “*Compañeras*,” Teresa ceremoniously begins, “Sara is a sociologist who works as a professor in the UNSE and studies *cabecita negras*.” Everybody laughs at the last remark, making approving sounds. “And she’ll tell us what she’s doing here in our cooperative.”

Teresa’s characterization of who I am and what I do is understandable. In Argentina, anthropology is popularly associated with archaeology. (Often, when I would introduce myself as an anthropologist, I would receive an enthusiastic response: “oh, like Indiana Jones?”.) But cultural anthropology more specifically tends to be seen as a subset of sociology. Second, since I had met Teresa in a class I gave, it was understandable she would say I am a professor at UNSE. However, I also suspect that in saying so, she would make my visit seem more important and turn it into a special occasion. Finally, in saying that I studied *cabecita negras*, she seemed to assume that to study racial differences in relation to class was automatically connected to the Peronist campaign, the working-class struggles, and the visibilization of the northern *criollo*. I later realized that it made perfect sense, as it turned out that Teresa, self-identifying with tongue-in-cheek as a *cabecita negra*, herself was a steadfast Peronist.

In response to Teresa’s generous introduction, I diplomatically I explain that I am not a sociologist and as much as I would be honored to have such a position, I am not a professor at UNSE. Nor am I studying *cabecita negras*. I then say that since one could argue that phenotypically, *cabecita negra* tends to refer to a person of mixed race, Teresa could be right in saying that my research concerns people who seventy years ago received the pejorative nickname “*cabecita negra*.” I continue to explain that I am interested in how mixed-race Santiagueños have begun to experience social mobility since the 2001-2 economic crisis. “So,

you *are* studying *cabecita negras*,” one of the ladies wittily exclaims. “She’s studying *us*,” Josefa replies, prompting further laughter. When I add to my explanation that I am studying different forms of entrepreneurialism and what it means to be entrepreneurial/entrepreneur, the laughter quiets down. Nena, at the age of 62 the eldest of the group, says that in her view, all of the cooperative members are entrepreneurs and the cooperative is their enterprise. “I told you, she’s here to study us,” Josefa says. This time her remark generates less laughter than utterances and nods of agreement. As I introduce myself that day, I am still unaware that my research there would drift away from my interest in race and take an angle to which until then, I had not paid too much attention: gender.

From then on, until I left the field in December 2017, I regularly went to the cooperative to spend time with the workers, conversing and interviewing them informally. During my first visits, I felt like there was very little I could offer in return for their patience with my questions and my repeated visits to the workshop. However, this began to change as Santiago’s annual winter fair drew closer. The fair lasts for the month of June and brings together entrepreneurs of all sorts, from honey producers and agricultural cooperatives, to leather artisans and jewelry makers. Reserving a table at the fair is not easy and the application process begins in February. In 2017, the cooperative had been able to secure a place and preparations for the upcoming sales mission had begun by the time I started visiting the workshop. They expected the fair to offer them opportunities to establish useful retail contacts and boost their sales. Yet their sales strategies were far from coherent and organized. They did not have business cards to hand to customers. Nor did they have a sales pitch to attract potential customers’ attention. Moreover, besides pictures haphazardly taken with mobile phones, they had no visual presentation of their work they could show to potential retailers. Two months after I had first met Teresa, I suggested

to her that I could produce a professional photographic catalogue of their work. While it would be distributed electronically, I also offered to produce physical copies that I knew the women would prefer. Many of them did not have computers nor felt comfortable using them. Teresa and the others received the idea with enthusiasm. Soon after, I started to photograph the progress of their work and their finished products. I also photographed the women themselves, thereby creating a visual narrative of the cooperative and its workings in general. I no longer felt intrusive and the women, too, started taking my visits as a normal weekly ritual, often excitedly showing to me what they had made during the week.

The more time I spent at the cooperative, the closer I grew with some of the workers. These women became my key informants at the site. I met them outside the cooperative, visiting their homes and meeting their families, and occasionally getting together with them for an afternoon mate (*merienda*) or dinner. As part of my ethnographic work, I accompanied the cooperative members to some of the courses they had to participate in as part of the contract with *Argentina Trabaja*. I also joined them twice in a one-day workshop organized by *Plataforma Emprender*, a privately and publicly funded institution set to foment entrepreneurship in Santiago.





## Institutional context

*La Cooperativa Integral de Santiago del Estero* was founded in 2012, the same year that *Argentina Trabaja*, the federal program that finances the cooperatives, started in Santiago del Estero. “It’s not a very exciting story, how the cooperative started,” Teresa says, and laughs.

- We didn’t get to choose who we would work with, people just signed up when *Argentina Trabaja* started in Santiago. They had different cooperative work options, and we who had signed up could choose the work from the different options, but not the cooperative group, the groups were formed by the *plan* [the program]. I chose park management, but it was quite confusing and the first work group, we were five women and one man, and we were destined to clean up industrial sites. I think it was called infrastructure maintenance (*mantenimiento de infraestructura*).
- Why did you decide to sign up, how did you do it?
- Well, at that point I had no regular work, which was one of the requirements to be eligible. It was a government subsidy and I thought the plan was good, you know, to create more jobs. Because it had been really horrible here just ten years earlier, and of course things were much better than at that point, but there was still much to do with the informal workers, I mean there still is! Anyways, I knew it wasn’t much money, but I’ve always been active in different communities and I liked the idea of working in a cooperative. I know it was more or less like that with the others as well, same story you know. Signing up was easy. I just went to their (*Argentina Trabaja*) new office in the center and gave my information!
- And how did you switch to artisanal work?
- Well, look, some people in our cooperative were not very... well, you know, cooperative! Nothing was organized and also, we didn’t always find work because the municipality also took care of some of the sites we were supposed to clean and maintain. So me and Josefa, Nancy, and Luján decided to start our own cooperative, but we needed more people, you needed a minimum of six participants. And it was a crazy idea but we decided we would learn carpentry! A couple of men joined us, they knew how to use machines and so they taught us. And when we registered, we also applied for machinery, and then got all these fancy machines! We just didn’t know how to use them! [And Teresa laughs.] Then more people started joining us, at the most there were 20 of us.

Teresa’s story of how the cooperative started and what led her to participate in *Argentina Trabaja* is similar to the stories I heard from the other workers. The story is telling of Teresa’s material necessities, her desire to work, and also of her engagement with community initiatives. But it also contains a spark of adventurousness: the crazy idea to start doing carpentry! The institutional framework was hardly one to encourage the cooperative members to be



‘adventurous.’ But it did facilitate Teresa’s and her friends/colleagues’ access to a vocation they were anything but familiar with.

*Argentina Trabaja* had been launched in Buenos Aires three years before Teresa and her colleagues formed their first cooperative. The program still exists, albeit with some modifications and now under the name *Hacemos Futuro* (We Make Future). Housed in the Ministry of Social Development, the objectives of the program were to “generate employment and jobs that benefit the community by reaching the most marginalized sectors of the society, and to offer them tools to integrate in the society through work in cooperatives” (*Ministerio de Desarrollo Social* website. My translation). The program was born out of the Kirchner government’s leftist agenda to foment social economy, defined as “solidary, distributive, and democratic” (Cardelli 2017). Situated in opposition to capitalist economy, the core of social economy was to spur economic growth on the basis of increased employment. That way, those without regularized work could be inserted in the remunerative labor markets. This, in turn, would generate more capital for the state through taxes and formal work arrangements while also fomenting consumption.

The roots of *Argentina Trabaja* trace back to a handful of public programs that president Carlos Menem’s neoliberal government instituted in 1990s. In the era of a political economy that did its best to dismantle the welfare state, these public programs were far from robust and often dysfunctional. The panorama changed after the 2001-2002 economic crisis and Argentina’s subsequent turn towards social democratic –or socialist– governance. Both Nestor and Cristina Kirchner’s governments instituted many new federally funded social measures, aid schemes and public programs. These initiatives included, for example, *la Asignación Universal por Hijo* (AUH - universal child support), which provides a fixed monthly allowance per child for people

below a certain income level. The *Plan Progresar* (Progress), in turn, is a university stipend scheme also with a monthly allowance, set to help students from underprivileged backgrounds to achieve higher education. These programs were planned to provide economic assistance and offer opportunities of social inclusion to society's poorest sectors. In practice, while many people undoubtedly have benefitted from them, their implementation has not been short of controversies. In the public discourse, they have been criticized primarily as merely palliative care that hardly addresses the structural problems undergirding social exclusion and poverty. Further, especially in relation to AUH, the popular criticism has pointed to the possible effect that free monetary incentives can have on people's willingness to work (De Sena & Chahbenderian, 2011). I have often heard this criticism –if not an outright complaint– when discussing such public programs with my informants. The logic goes as following: poor people receive free money per child and therefore they have more children and are ever less enthusiastic about finding regular jobs. Hence, unemployment does not decrease and the people –*el pueblo*– becomes lazier.

*Argentina Trabaja* has not been exempted from criticism either. Among its critics, De Sena and Chahbenderian (2011) argue that despite the program's noble mandate of social inclusion, it has not been able to achieve its goal. Politics of social inclusion imply all citizens having the same *rights* to participate in different fields of societal life; having the same *rights* to work and to operate as active producers and consumers in economic and sociocultural spheres. In *Argentina Trabaja*, however, the rhetoric of *rights* ends up being eclipsed by the politics of *obligations*. The cooperative members must meet a series of stipulations that effectively divest them of their rights to freely choose their line of work, requires them to participate in skill-acquisition courses, and confines them to a salary category that does not meet the nationally

established minimum. This last point has also served as a pivot for criticism: how can a program intended to foment employment offer a salary that effectively keeps the workers below the poverty line? This evident paradox in the program's internal logic makes it difficult for the cooperative members to exit from the economic constraints that maintain them in the social category of the poor (LoVuolo 2010). In other words, the program ends up serving as a short-term emergency measure to temporarily solve the problem of unemployment; not as a long-term solution based on sustainable labor politics.

Yet so far, hundreds of thousands of Argentines have benefitted from *Argentina Trabaja*.<sup>77</sup> While the critique against the program seems fair, one should not overlook the positive repercussions the program has had in many previously unemployed people's lives. In Josefa's words,

I know the program isn't perfect, I mean, it's even exploitative and the pay is shit. But, look, we have *obra social* (social security) and also *aporte jubilatorio* (pension plan). That's something you obviously don't get working *en negro* (informally) and in general you're just in a precarious situation if anything happens to you or your family, if you're not inside the system. And yes, people say that they earn more working as domestic employees, like for example for 5000 pesos a month. We get 4000 (2017). But we also work only half-a-day. And afterwards, many of us work *en negro*, which is necessary, and we keep our *obra social*! I know it's not permitted but you have to find ways out, you know, be creative. And the thing is, working in the cooperative is better than not working at all, right? Because who guarantees that you can get a job as a cleaner? This work is secure.

Josefa's account alludes to one of the basic theoretical premises that underpins *Argentina Trabaja* (and today *Hacemos Futuro*). In line with the principles of social economy, the program recognizes the invisible masses of informal workers as productive members of the society.

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<sup>77</sup> The number of participants has varied, since the inception of the program until 2018, between 100,000 and 200,000 (Ministerio de Desarrollo Social de la Nación, 2018.)

Moreover, the program allows those masses' entry into legitimate labor categories. Despite these categories being often emergent and transitory, working within them implies benefitting from the system of formalized work. While this entails a set of concrete rights and obligations (e.g. legal rights, the right to *obra social*, the obligation to take part in skill-building courses), for the participants, it also holds important symbolic value. Being a legally recognized worker in the view of the state confers them a sense of belonging in environments where they potentially have a voice and can serve as legitimate producers and makers. In other words, it bestows them a sense of agency which many as informal workers may not have experienced before. This sense of agency is what enables the cooperative members to shape their identities as entrepreneurial laborers. And although the institutional framework is far from flawless, and in many ways, it is even restricting, the workers still see the cooperative as a site that potentiates them. "If I find some formal job that pays better, of course I'll take it, that's the whole point," Josefa says. "For many of us, the cooperative is something temporal, but it makes us feel that we're working towards finding ways out, pushing forward."

### **Cooperative entrepreneurialism in times of neoliberalism**

Teresa, Josefa, Nena and I are participating in a workshop on entrepreneurial strategies (*Estrategias de la Emprendeduría*) in Santiago's Technology and Exhibition Center, *Nodo Tecnológico*. The workshop is organized by *Plataforma Emprender* (*PE* - best translated as "Entrepreneurial Platform"). *PE* is a program that supports entrepreneurship in the province of Santiago by cooperating with Santiago's universities (the National and the Catholic Universities), the provincial ministry of production and also a private foundation called *Endeavor Argentina*. The conference room where we are sitting is large; I count that there are at

least 60 people there. Rather than a workshop, our gathering resembles more a conference where, over four hours, two different speakers go through diverse entrepreneurship-related topics. To commence the first session, the speaker asks everybody in the room to say their name, what they dedicate themselves to, and what their startup/enterprise (*emprendimiento*) is, if they already have one. The exercise takes a while. The overwhelming majority of the participants seem to be in their 20s or early 30s; most of them say they are yet to start their business. Their businesses and business ideas range from textile design and sports trophy-fabrication to perfume sales. I observe the racial and gender make-up in the room, and while the majority could be described as white, phenotypically mixed-race looking people also populate the space. There seems to be a few more men than women. After the first few have introduced themselves as “entrepreneurs,” the rest follow suit. As if in an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting, the microphone passes from one entrepreneur to another: “*hola*, my name is Juan, and I’m an accountancy student and also an entrepreneur;” “*Hola qué tal*, I’m Elsa and like everybody else here (laughs), I’m an entrepreneur, and I’m here because I am starting a business with my mother, a flower business.” Then the microphone reaches the row where the four of us are sitting. Teresa takes it and authoritatively speaking for Nena and Josefa as well, she says: “my *compañeras* and I are entrepreneurs from a cooperative and we dedicate ourselves to making *artesanía*. And we’re here to learn about business strategies.” When Teresa passes the microphone to me, I introduce myself as a student of social sciences whose current *emprendimiento* is her thesis.

In both sessions, the speakers continuously emphasize how important it is for young business owners to have “entrepreneurial qualities.” One of the first slides in the first session is titled: “¿*Qué es un emprendedor?*” – “what is an entrepreneur?” Point by point the animated slide reveals a list of adjectives: “innovative,” “courageous,” “flexible,” “creative,”

“determined.” As each point appears on the slide, the speaker unpacks the implications of the given characteristic, using concrete examples to illustrate its meaning in practice. Most people in the room, Teresa, Josefa, Nena and myself included, are taking notes. What the speaker’s enthusiastic presentation reveals is an image of an entrepreneur whom José Natanson calls “the capitalist hero of the 21<sup>st</sup> century” (2016:1, my translation). “Born in the post-state world of wellbeing and equipped with the necessary agility to adapt to mercilessly changing conditions of the global economy, the entrepreneur is not simply a business entrepreneur, but an innovator who finds audacious solutions to old problems (ibid., my translation.). Echoing Natanson, the speakers delineate an idea of today’s entrepreneur which encompasses more than simply the practice of conducting profit-seeking business. Discussing the importance of solidarity and staying connected within one’s own social and business communities, they challenge the classic idea of a solitary entrepreneur who is presumably as independent as she is lonely in her work. One slide has a cartoon drawing of a group of smiling men and women with their arms around each other. It is titled: “*Recordá, no tenés que estar solo*” (Remember, you do not have to be alone). The ideal entrepreneur, I write in my notes, seems to be some kind of a combination of Superman, Mark Zuckenberg, and a neighborhood priest.

In the 1990s, president Carlos Menem’s neoliberal economic and political agenda promoted privatizations, open market economy and free trade, radical reduction of the state’s functions, and also entrepreneurship. The celebrated figure of an entrepreneur, then, was an individual ambassador of money-making whose quest for economic capital overshadowed the quest for the common good. The outcome of Menem’s economic politics –soaring foreign debt accrued through cheap IMF and World Bank loans combined with dramatically reduced welfare programs– faced a tragic end in the 2001-02 cash crisis. Two years later, with Nestor Kirchner as

Argentina's President, national economic policies changed course. Kirchner's approach was guided by social democratic principles of a robust state structure, expanded public welfare programs, and economic protectionism. Despite the ideological tide change under Kirchner, entrepreneurialism continued to occupy an important role in the public imaginaries of a successful economy, albeit in a different way. The government embraced entrepreneurialism as a platform to expand employment opportunities, with the support of state resources. Through public financing, credit incentives and even logistical support, the idea of entrepreneurialism became increasingly linked to social capital, e.g. social networking and cooperation (Cardelli 2017; Natalucci 2018). Cardelli argues that it was within this Kirchnerist ethos of social economy that entrepreneurialism not only became a project of the state for the benefit of the state. It also turned into an ideal sustained by understandings of solidarity "not as a moral appeal but as a construction of an economic system" that privileges cooperation over competition (2017:3 My translation.). The state-sponsored formation of cooperatives concretized this ideal.

The history of cooperativism in Argentina dates back to the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. With the massive arrival of immigrants in the country at the time, the early cooperatives tended to be organized around shared nationalities, professions and skills, and socioeconomic positions. Moreover, they served as representative bodies to give voice to different immigrant communities, thereby furthering sense of solidarity and common goals among the members. At the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the state was still ruled by a small oligarchy whose objection to communism reflected in its stance towards the cooperatives. Yet despite the state's efforts to limit their functions, the cooperatives prevailed (Plotinsky 2015). Since its early moorings, cooperative entrepreneurship has remained as a constant in the Argentine landscape of labor organization. Its position vis-à-vis state-promoted labor politics has dovetailed the country's

political ebbs and flows. At times, cooperativism has represented an alternative to economic policies that have led to soaring unemployment and subsequent austerity measures (e.g. during the military dictatorship in 1976-1983, Menem's second government 1995-1999, and also during the economic crisis of 2001-02). At other times, cooperativism has been adopted as a labor model encouraged by the state, such as during early Peronism in the late 1940s, and most recently during Kirchnerism (Arcidiácono et al. 2014; Montes & Ressel 2003). Whether endorsed and encouraged by the state or not, cooperative model of labor has stood to challenge first the late 19<sup>th</sup>/early 20<sup>th</sup> century liberalism and later the developing neoliberal economic politics. But it has not challenged the prominence of entrepreneurialism/entrepreneurship and the idealization of the entrepreneurial citizen in the public and political discourse. On the contrary, the cooperative model of work reconciles with the neoliberal world order through entrepreneurialism and entrepreneurship: entrepreneurialism as a legitimizing characteristic or quality of a productive citizen, and entrepreneurship as the concrete practice of (economic) production.

In the *Plataforma Emprender* workshop, neither of the speakers nor any audience member utters the word "cooperative." As Teresa, Josefa, Nena and I head out of the workshop, I ask them how they relate themselves and their cooperative with the kind of ideas of entrepreneurialism promoted in the workshop. Josefa is very articulate with her insights and, given her "four decades of obsessive reading," has a wealth of general knowledge and an acute understanding of Argentina's socioeconomic reality. She says that of course their cooperative is not the kind of enterprise that most people in the audience either have or aspire to have. Moreover, there is the very fundamental difference of their cooperative being restricting in terms of the members' economic growth (given that the monthly salary is fixed, and the individual



income generated by the sales is not much). The current and aspiring entrepreneurs in the workshop, on the other hand, seemingly dream of making their enterprise their sole and solid source of income. Josefa then says that working in a cooperative does not make them any less entrepreneurial than the other workshop participants. There I pause her for a second. In Spanish, the noun ‘entrepreneur’ and the adjective ‘entrepreneurial’ is the same: *emprendedor*. While the speech context usually makes evident which meaning one is using, here I am not sure. When I ask Josefa whether she means they are not any less entrepreneurial or not less entrepreneurs, she herself pauses for a second. Then she says she actually means both. To work in a cooperative does not mean that one must be *entrepreneurial* although the cooperative is an enterprise in its own right. In fact, many cooperative workers, she says, stay in a cooperative just to have a fixed income and social security benefits, without really caring about the work itself. Teresa chimes in and loudly says how they know all too many cooperatives like that and that usually such cooperatives do not last for long. Then Josefa continues: “I’d say our cooperative empowers me (*me empodera*) as an entrepreneurial person, and I think it has to do with us being women and working together, and those other entrepreneurs don’t have that privilege.”

A labor cooperative that produces woodwork and handicrafts is not equivalent to a retail business or a bakery, let alone a high-tech start-up. Working in a cooperative, such as the Cooperativa Integral that this chapter discusses, does not require high risk-taking. Rather, it is a relatively safe option in terms of stable albeit underpaid employment. Although its members’ goal obviously is to produce extra income on top of the basic state-provided salary, the cooperative is not a business- but a job-oriented enterprise. And yet the cooperative workers deem themselves entrepreneurs; certainly entrepreneurial. The global and national neoliberal context in which the cooperative exists does not cease to promote entrepreneurship as a principal

driving force for a buoyant economy Further, the political and economic context of Kirchnerism –i.e. when the coop was founded– also celebrated the entrepreneurial citizen. But the discourse the Kirchnerist government produced bended more towards celebrating entrepreneurialism on the whole than exclusively entrepreneurship. The focus if that discourse was less on business-building and enterprise-management than it was on how to generate employment. In both political contexts –during Kirchnerism and today during Macri’s government–, the public discourse generated and popularized vocabularies that made the terms ‘*emprededor*’ and ‘*emprededuría*’ part of the everyday household lexicon. Programs such as *Plataforma Emprender* and the events it organizes further divulge popular understandings of the concepts, making them accessible across socioeconomic sectors. Expressed by Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval:

[Entrepreneurialism] is no longer so much a question of the specific function of the entrepreneur in the economic process, as of the entrepreneurial faculty as it exists in every subject; the subject’s capacity to become an entrepreneur in the various aspects of his life, even to be the entrepreneur of his existence. In short, it is a question of doing what is required for everyone to become as ‘enterprising’ as possible (2013:134).

This democratization of the entrepreneurial spirit reflects in the cooperative members’ frequent addressing of themselves as *emprededoras*. They are those who fight to go forward, aspire to progress, search and find “ways out” (*buscar salidas*), and “dirty their hands” (*ensuciar las manos*) in order to move forward and upward from their current socioeconomic position. The cooperative members may not come readily to mind when thinking about the entrepreneur as the “capitalist hero of the 21<sup>st</sup> century” embedded in the current neoliberal world order. But when the idea of an entrepreneur means not simply a daring, innovative and creative individual, but also one who is solidary and a socially connected fighter (Adamovsky 2017), the intersections between cooperativism and entrepreneurialism become clearer. If not always in their modus

operandi, they certainly connect in their entrepreneurial spirit, market dependency, and shared vocabularies.

### **Entrepreneurial identity: from an informal worker to an entrepreneur in a gendered ‘laborscape’**

“To be honest, I don’t really consider myself a [domestic] employee (*empleada*) anymore. Maybe it’s because I’m working here now, more or less working for myself,” Nena says, as we talk about her previous jobs. She is the eldest member of the cooperative, and also one of the first ones to join it. Her skin is dark and hair pitch-black, which she laughingly confesses to have died since her forties to hide the grey. Throughout her life, she tells me, she has worked as a domestic employee for different families in Santiago. When she was younger, she was a housekeeper who did everything from cooking and cleaning to taking care of her employers’ children. Later in her life, her duties have mostly involved cleaning. Her mother, too, had worked as a domestic employee. Nena’s two daughters, however, have both become ‘professionals’ –one is a kindergarten teacher and the other one works for the municipality–, and she hopes her grandchildren will all go to university.

When I was young, before I got married, I worked as *camadentro* (a domestic employee who lives with the family she works for). I started secondary school but after the first year I dropped out because we just didn’t have money and all of us children also had to work. Well, work *more*; I already worked in the afternoons after school. So, I got a job with a family in the center and I lived with them for eight or nine years! They were really good people, decent people; you have no idea how much I loved their kids! But when I married, I couldn’t work as *camadentro* anymore and had to find another job with another family. I’ve actually been really lucky with the families I’ve worked for, they’ve all been good people and always treated me well, like I’ve always felt respected, you know.

“Did you always work informally?”, I ask her. “Yes... I mean, to formalize my work was never even an option, I never thought about it; I mean, I didn’t even think it would be possible!” When

Nena continues to talk about her former employers, she speaks of them with warmth and fondness. It is evident that her role in the families has extended beyond a rigidly structured worker-employer relationship. Nena's story echoes the narratives that Santiago Canevaro (2016) analyzes among domestic workers in the northern province of Corrientes. Of similar characteristics as Santiago, Corrientes, too, is poor and with a considerable indigenous and mixed-race population. The rate of informal labor in the province is high and domestic employment in particular is still an important job sector. Canevaro discusses the transition from informal to formal domestic labor, emphasizing the generational differences among the workers. He argues that it is the framework of informality that fosters relationships of affect among the employees and the *patrones* (the employers). The conditions of informality also generate varying degrees of dependency. The workers come to identify themselves as "helpers" who fulfill a role marked by affect and attachment within the family—even in cases when this relationship may be abusive (*ibid.*).

The Kirchnerist government established and implemented new labor laws that facilitated the formalization of undocumented workers. The laws were aimed to have impact especially in provinces such as Santiago, where the informal sector in 2017 reached over 50% (INDEC 2018).<sup>78</sup> Moreover, Santiago is known for being one of the principal 'exporters' of migrant labor in the country. Many of the emigrating workers end up laboring in territories of informality even as they leave the province, typically with men occupying jobs in the construction industry and women destined to work as domestic employees. Aiming to foment the workers' insertion in formal labor markets, the Kirchnerist labor laws have had particular resonance among domestic

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<sup>78</sup> As of 2017, the informal sector had again risen as a consequence of the looming economic crisis and increasing unemployment in the province. In 2017, it stood at 51% – the highest in the country where the average at the time was 33% (INDEC 2018).

workers of younger generations (Canevaro 2016). Domestic workers in their twenties and thirties, especially those with further professional ambitions, have become aware of their legal rights. They are better equipped than the elder generations to demand that their employers provide them with labor benefits, such as social security and retirement contributions. This, in turn, enables them to deem themselves not as ‘helpers’ or ‘servants,’ or *empleadas* – a term that in Spanish often refers to simply a domestic worker, or a maid–, but simply as workers (*trabajadores*) with documented and legally protected working rights. Nena, who these days “helps” a couple of families a few times a week does not seem to make much about the question of legalization. Further, the moment she joined the cooperative, the possibility to formalize her work as a domestic employee became foreclosed –it is against the rules of *Argentina Trabaja* to have a job outside the cooperative. Thus, in order to supplement the meager income provided by her cooperative work, she and many others resort to parallel informal work. Despite the simultaneity of these different forms of work, it is clear from her narratives that her formal, cooperative employment outweighs the relevance of her domestic work. She sees herself neither as an *empleada* nor as a “helper.” However, neither does she refer to herself as a “worker” but as a *cooperativista* or *emprededora* – an entrepreneur. Being an entrepreneur is a status imbued with symbolic meaning, and as such, more valuable than a paying job as an employee trapped in the markets of informal economy.

As opposed to many other labor cooperatives that work in public infrastructure maintenance, the Cooperativa Integral’s focus on production and sales cultivates ideas of entrepreneurialism the members can easily relate to. However, as Malena Hopp (2016) has discovered conducting research in the outskirts of Buenos Aires, cooperatives dedicated to public work also foster the construction of novel labor identities. Similar to Canevaro’s analysis, Hopp,

too, argues that the shift from informal to formal work reflects in the workers' self-identifications. Indeed, they come to see themselves primarily as *cooperativistas* and *trabajadores* while many of them continue their parallel work in the informal sector. This is particularly noteworthy since *Argentina Trabaja*, despite its premise of social inclusion, restricts the cooperative workers' economic standing and also limits the workings of the cooperatives themselves. A cooperative, such as the Cooperativa Integral, that is rooted in practices of entrepreneurship, allows its members to surpass the stage of becoming *trabajadores*. Their trade shapes their entrepreneurial subjectivities in ways that allows them to call themselves entrepreneurs.

"I definitely think we're all entrepreneurs here, at least I think so, I mean we do business!", says Belén, 28.

But I don't think you have to do business to be entrepreneurial, it's more about what you do with your life in general, you know. It's like, like my grandparents were entrepreneurial, their aim was to have their own house and they worked in their land and had animals, and they also sold their products... For instance, I don't want to have my business. But this [working in the cooperative] teaches me a lot, I think it's about learning to be your own boss, but also about working with others.

Belén is studying to become a kindergarten teacher and will complete her program in a year. Although worries about whether she will get a job once she graduates, she knows that she can continue working in the cooperative – "as long as our cooperative stays alive!" Belén seems to straddle between desires for stability and ideas of risk-taking as part of being an entrepreneur. "Doing business is about taking risks, I've seen this with my parents – they have a kiosk, and woman, it's not easy! So it's kind of funny that we're doing business but we also have stability, you know, social security and pension fund and fixed salary." Belén says she makes about 6000-

6500 pesos a month.<sup>79</sup> She tops it up with occasional work as a nanny. From her salary, she pays for her monthly fees at the institute where she studies, helps her parents whom she still lives with, and saves the rest. “When you graduate and start working as a *maestra*, do you think you’ll still think of yourself as an entrepreneur?”, I ask her. “I mean, like I said, I don’t think being an entrepreneur means necessarily having a business. I think it’s more about how you go about your life, you know, like attitude, to be entrepreneurial.” I am again confused about her parallel use of being an entrepreneur and being entrepreneurial – does Belén purposely conflate the two; how does she conceptualize the differences between the two terms? As I inquire about this, she laughs and somewhat embarrassed, she says she doesn’t really know. Then she thinks for a second and tells me that it really depends on the context. “I think here I’m an entrepreneur because although we’re a cooperative, this is also an enterprise (*emprendimiento*) and that makes us entrepreneurs. But even when not here, I consider myself entrepreneurial, I’d say I have an entrepreneurial personality. Maybe when I start working as a *maestra* I can’t say anymore that I’m an entrepreneur, but I can still be entrepreneurial.” The way Belen makes meaning of entrepreneurialism is complex and, at times, confused. How she discusses it seems to borrow directly from the public rhetoric that constantly generates imaginaries of entrepreneurialism and implants related vocabularies in people’s everyday discourse. These vocabularies offer a way to package the idea of entrepreneurialism so that can fit it different situations and that can contain myriad meanings at once. In that sense, being an entrepreneur/ial becomes a flexible self-conception. In Belen’s narrative, that flexibility shows in the variety of meanings she attributes to her entrepreneurial practices. At the same time, those meanings all crystallize in how she defines and describes herself.

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<sup>79</sup> At the time of the interview, 6000 pesos was roughly 300 dollars. 4000 of that salary was the basic salary provided by *Argentina Trabaja*. The rest was from the cooperative’s gains.

Belén's account also exemplifies the fluidity of labor identities that also shine through other cooperative members' narratives. Given how much she uses the terms entrepreneur and entrepreneurial in her speech, I encourage her to explain more explicitly what she means. Perhaps without my directly asking about it, the now overtly expressed fluidity and malleability of her self-identifications would rest more heavily on my own interpretation. But the flexibility of the cooperative members' subjectivities does not mean that the 'different hats' they wear would not be prioritized directly in relation to their socioeconomic conditions. Teresa is very clear about this as one morning we go to the cooperative together and I bring up the conversation I had had with Belén some weeks earlier. Talking about the legalization of domestic employment, she says that many *empleadas* are reticent about it and prefer to stay *en negro* – undocumented. First of all, she says, it gives them more flexibility with negotiating their salary as it costs a lot of money for the employer to provide the employee legal status. For many *empleadas* it is more important to have more monthly income than less income and better long-term benefits. "The thing is, when one is poor, one lives in the present," she meaningfully says. The second point Teresa makes is particularly illuminating. Intellectualizing the subject, she says that for many of her coworkers in the cooperative, formalizing their domestic employment would also formalize their identity as *empleadas*. It seems to me that in that sense, the fluidity of the women's labor identities meets its restrictions in the ways the women *want* to see themselves. To be, even to aspire to be an entrepreneur does not seem to be compatible with being a domestic worker, and even less so a domestic worker *en negro*. Being an entrepreneur and entrepreneurial has its moorings in aspirations to be socioeconomically mobile. The cooperative members' conversations reveal the idea that being an *empleada* implies socioeconomic stagnation.



### The cooperative as a platform for mobility and *progress*

Sofía, 29, has been able to set up her own business while working in the cooperative, although it is in her husband's name. She has had to put her business in her husband's name because otherwise, she would not be able to participate in *Argentina Trabaja*. This is rather ironic: The idea of the program is to help the participants to use the cooperative as a springboard to insert themselves in the job markets or, even better, set their own business. Yet running a business parallel to running a cooperative is not among the cooperative workers' rights. Besides the fact that officially, Sofía cannot be the owner of her own kiosk, her story serves almost as a casebook example of the noble intentions of *Argentina Trabaja*. She has worked in the cooperative for five years. Through diligent saving, she has acquired the necessary capital to start a store where she and her husband sell vegetables. For her, despite her continuing to work in the cooperative, being an entrepreneur means having her *own* business: "Imagine, I'm literally my own boss!", she proudly says. Sofía was born in the neighborhood of Autonomía to abject poverty. She met her husband, Marcos, as a teenager and got married at the age of 20. She and her husband have a 3-year old son. In an interview, she tells me her life story:

We had nothing when I was a child, I mean *nothing*. Not even an indoor toilet. But my parents were really hard workers and they worked in anything and wherever they could. I've told them many times how thankful I am for having learnt that example from them. When I moved out with Marcos, and we moved to this tiny, tiny place which Marcos got from his parents, we had nothing, not even a kitchen table. (Laughs), you know, we used to plastic boxes, the ones you see in the supermarkets, as chairs! And we also, we both just worked like *negros*! I still have those plastic boxes, now in my vegetable shop!

We both have finished secondary school and Marcos studied carpentry. I couldn't (study further) because I had to start working to help my parents... It's taken us seven years to build our home, to have a real kitchen and a bathroom, get furniture. I've saved literally everything I've could that I've earned with the Cooperative. I don't know how I've done it. I've gone to all the (*Argentina Trabaja*) courses and learnt about business, and I was also able to get a loan to start my own business two years ago. I mean, it started as just a small vegetable kiosk, and at first I sold vegetables through our kitchen window! But then we

were able to expand our house with an extra room and now that room is the shop. And it's not just vegetables anymore, we also sell fruit and some other food stuff. Marcos still works outside (the store) but when I'm here (the coop) in the mornings, he is in the shop... I've also been able to help my parents build a better kitchen in their house... I'd like my home to have a second floor so that when my son goes to the university, he can live upstairs while he studies. After that he can go wherever he wants!

Sofía says that working in the cooperative has empowered her. She has received a lot of support from her co-workers, and she has learned a lot about administering money. Launching herself into entrepreneurship felt scary –it still does, she says–, yet being in the cooperative has enabled her to be more level-headed and analytical about the risks and benefits involved in her business. Also, she says that even if she will not necessarily need the practical skills she has learnt in the cooperative (carpentry, painting, etc.), they do help her innovate and be creative with decorative ideas for her own shop. I can imagine her paying attention to the aesthetic details in the vegetable store. She seems naturally skilled with her artisanal work and as I observe her painting jewelry boxes, her way of maneuvering the brushes and mixing colors seems effortless and artful.

Sofía often mentions the cooperative, as if deeming it as an incubator where she has cultivated her courage. The stability that working in the cooperative offers reduces the stakes that can be at play in launching one's own enterprise. But when Sofía discusses her future plans, the cooperative seems to disappear from her narration. She would like to expand her business. She would like to obtain a better locale that would not occupy space in her house. That is, she would like to rent a place somewhere in the neighborhood she lives in, not far from her home. "I want to *progress*," she says. "It is important to *progress*," "the country needs to *progress*," "it's difficult to *progress* if the country doesn't support entrepreneurs." The verb *progress* inhabits her speech as she lays out her future plans. Yet at the same time, uncertainty about the future

economic conditions<sup>80</sup> also shines through her recounting: “I don’t think it’s easy to be an entrepreneur in Argentina;” “If Macri starts taking away different social services and programs, it’ll be hard to progress;”<sup>81</sup> “You have to be really careful with risks (involved in being an entrepreneur).” Sofia’s narratives triangulate between dynamic ideas of progress, risk-related cautiousness, and the security of the cooperative. It is clear, however, that her desires and aims to improve her socioeconomic position are tied to her business; not the cooperative. In the present, she continues to straddle between her cooperative work that not only offers a fixed income, but also keeps her connected to her coworkers and the business-related workshops the program provides. She envisions this balance to change in the future, when she can throw herself into the more competitive markets of small businesses. The way she discusses her life –the past, the present, and the future– seems to structure her understandings of social mobility. The stability of the cooperative combined with its business-orientation potentiates Sofia’s entrepreneurial attitude. That attitude, which she claims to have inherited from her parents, undergirds her drive to push her own business forward. Her business improves her material conditions. And accruing economic capital will enable her to eventually send her son to a university. Sofia’s story is far from unique: it reflects the Argentine immigrants’ success stories a hundred years earlier. It is also an example of the positive direction that working in a cooperative may lead to, especially for those who otherwise would be likely to stay in the society’s all but forgotten margins.

While the cooperative has helped Sofía to start self-identifying as an entrepreneur, for Belén, it serves as a steppingstone toward becoming a professional. Her aspirations to become a

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<sup>80</sup> At the time I conducted the interviews, in 2017, there were already an economic crisis was already looming in the air. Inflation was growing, socioeconomic indexes pointed to a rise in poverty, and although unemployment had not yet grown in Santiago (in 2017 the province of Santiago had the third smallest unemployment rate in the country), salaries were stagnated and by no means commensurable with the inflation.

<sup>81</sup> President Mauricio Macri’s economic policies have in many ways been disastrous at worst and dubious at best. However, as of 2019, he has not reduced the federal social services budget.

kindergarten teacher, she says, would be much harder to achieve if she did not work in the cooperative. She also recognizes that since she lives with her parents, she does not need to worry about rent or other living expenses. This is common in Santiago among unmarried women and men in their early twenties. Belén says she wants to make a difference, and according to her, to study and work with children is precisely that. She deems education as one of the basic pillars that sustain and promote societal *progress*. But she then tells me that she did not used to think like that. After graduating from high school, her concerns had revolved around all things material: she wanted a motorcycle and a cellphone; in her words, she wanted this and that. Gradually her worldview has changed –and working in the cooperative for the past three years has affected her transforming ideas. Rather than wanting stuff, she has decided she wants to do things to benefit others. Belén is not a romantic and does not see the cooperative as a privileged social enterprise in its own right. Moreover, she is conscious that in certain ways the cooperative perpetuates precarious labor – mostly due to the imposed salary restrictions. However, she does see the cooperative as a space that encourages collaboration and solidarity. According to Belén, to learn to work by cooperating with others is more valuable than only seeking individual, material satisfaction.

Belén's parents always encouraged her to study, inculcating her with ideas of the importance of education and how it "opens doors." She again brings up the cooperative. She tells me how having a community in the cooperative, learning the trade together with her coworkers, and seeing the fruit of own artisanal work has buttressed her sense of self-confidence. "We're not just entrepreneurs, we're also *progresistas*" (people striving for progress), she says, and continues: "I don't think this country can progress if we don't educate ourselves." The word *progress* populates Belén's sentences, much like Sofia's. Yet while Sofia ties her understandings

of progress to economic stability and growth, for Belén progress seems to be inherently linked to cultural capital: knowledge, education, and professionalization. In a separate conversation at the cooperative, I discuss with Belén her interests beyond her work and studies. She tells me how she would like to travel, and “learn about different cultures.” When I ask her where she would like to travel, contrary to the most common answers of “to Miami,” “to New York,” “to Europe,” she tells me she would first like to travel across Argentina. “We have so much in this country; why should I go abroad before I know my own land? But then I want to travel in Latin America, Peru and Colombia.”

Conversations with Sofía and Belén reflect those I have with other cooperative members. Those members who are in the 20s and 30s deem the cooperative as a stable territory that enables some to conjure up ‘riskier’ plans for future –such as starting one’s own business. For others, it supports their aims to climb upward on the professional ladder and obtain special skills, diplomas, or even university degrees. For the workers their 40s and 50s, the cooperative also represents a sense of stability –a stable income with a stable group of coworkers. Yet while the benefits of stability may reflect in their household economies, the cooperative indirectly serves as means to enable their children to construct a better socioeconomic status for themselves, especially through university education. In that sense, the cooperative fosters the acquisition of both economic (meager yet stable) and cultural capital that is channeled through different conduits towards the same aim: generational socioeconomic growth. Despite the economic hardships that the cooperative workers still may face; despite the wider economic conditions that do not bode well and the restrictions that *Argentina Trabaja* imposes on the members, there is a consensus that the cooperative empowers and potentiates them.



Nena making prototype for a dollhouse.

### **Gendered entrepreneurialism**

In *Gender and Entrepreneurship: an ethnographic approach*, Bruni, Gherardi, and Poggio discuss the ingredients of entrepreneurship, provocatively suggesting that they primarily include “risk, money, innovation, and gender neutrality” (2005:143). Yet in fact, throughout the book their aim is to demonstrate how entrepreneurship is anything but gender neutral. Entrepreneurship, they argue, has become assumed as gender neutral because of the normalization of the hegemonic masculinity whose characteristics, along with classic gender binaries, define it. “Entrepreneurship [as a] symbolic construct concerns the ‘conquest of new markets and new territories,’ so that masculinity is a competitive process which tends to exclude whoever is not ‘man’ enough to be a ‘predator’” (2005:57). The sentence evokes an image of a great white shark on the hunt. The shark’s velocity, reaction speed, and the capacity to kill another shark with one bite stand as an allegory to a profit-seeking and somewhat ruthless

entrepreneur. Take the adjectives that describe an ideal entrepreneur, listed on one of the slides in the *Plataforma Emprender* workshop: “innovative,” “courageous,” “flexible,” “creative,” “determined.” While these do not speak so much of ruthlessness as they speak of business acumen, it is still easy to detect the traces of widely shared understandings of masculinity concealed in each of those words. The list of gender binaries: masculine/feminine; public/private; productive/reproductive and so on could easily extend with courageous/timid; innovative/unimaginative; flexible/rigid, etc. While Bruni et al. discuss entrepreneurship as a symbolic construct, their argument concerning its gendered-ness also applies in the wider context of entrepreneurialism. It implies diverse economically oriented practices as well as an attitude and a way of being.

In the cooperative, entrepreneurship intersects with the cooperative’s gendered labor – woodwork– and with the everyday ‘discursive performances of gender’ in the workspace itself (Bruni et al. 2005; Butler 1990). Although the cooperative’s work involves craft techniques related to handiwork (gluing, assembling, painting, etc.), the members also maneuver the heavy carpentry machines with seeming ease and familiarity. In the machine hall, there is a large table where the workers sand the edges of the cut pieces. At one point, I observe Nena and Nancy jointly carry a long and heavy wooden board. Nancy intends to cut it into six pieces of about 12 x 12in. They will form the bases of a new set of mirror drawers she has designed with Nena and Josefa. Today she intends to start making the prototype. I am working there with my camera that day, photographing the work process rather than the products. I approach Nena and Nancy to take pictures of them using the machine. I also tease them saying that they look like *señores carpinteros* (Mr. Carpenters), on purpose poking the associations between carpentry and masculinity. They both chuckle and then Nancy yells over the noises in the hall: “we’re much

more than *señores carpinteros*; we're *señoras carpinteras!*" (Mrs. Carpenters). Nancy's exclamation immediately conjures up Howard Miller's iconic (1943) image, "We can do it!". It portrays "Rosie the Riveter" showing her biceps, representing the American women who during the Second World War took factory and other industrial jobs traditionally occupied by men. Josefa and María, who are working at the table, laugh at Nancy's statement, nodding in agreement. I go to the table to sit with them and prepare the mate. I directly ask about their views on being women in a workspace that is highly masculine, certainly in Santiago's context where nobody I had asked knows any female carpenters. Josefa, with her usual eloquent and intellectual manner of expressing herself, begins to talk about the "patriarchal norms" (*normas patriarcales*) that dictate people's conceptions of women's and men's work, and how conservative Santiago is in that regard. I have not brought my recorder to the cooperative that day but when I return home, I write in my notes:

*Josefa so very often talks about the society and how it is very machista here, and how it structures our behavior and values. Her vocabulary, and the way she discusses those things impresses me, given that she never studied beyond the secondary school. Today she told me she thinks feminism is not about being better than men but about being able to do whatever men do and it not being a big deal. She doesn't think she's a carpenter; she calls herself an entrepreneur, luchador [fighter] and a cooperativista. But being able to do what a carpenter does makes her a better entrepreneur. (She adds, "Yo no soy carpintera, pero eso no quiere decir que no pueda hacer lo que hace un carpintero –o una carpintera.")*

*We talked about being a woman, working in carpentry, and using woodwork machinery, and she said that her two daughters (19 and 23) are very proud of her. She stressed, many times, how she intends to be a different kind of mother to her kids than her own had been. That she doesn't want to inculcate them with ideas about how women should be, and what women should do, but wants them to discover those things on their own instead.*

Josefa separated from her husband in 2004. The husband was a "drunken gambler."

Josefa grew tired of watching him constantly put their precarious economic situation into jeopardy, besides having to watch him "cry over the bottle" every weekend. Thus, Josefa took her three children and moved away. At first, she stayed with her mother but soon enough was



able to move back to the house she had shared with her husband as dictated by the divorce agreement. She worked mostly as a cleaner, sold homemade baked goods, and also benefitted from federal public aid. Luckily, she had aunts who were able to help her by taking care of her children when they were not at school and she was at work. She brings up her story as we continue our conversation about what it means to be a woman and do work traditionally associated with masculinity. “I don’t have to answer to anybody,” she sternly says, implying she does not have to negotiate her womanhood with a male partner only because she works in a relatively masculine field. Nancy, having now cut the wooden boards she needs, joins us at the table. She says her husband is not very conservative, but it did take him a while to come to terms with his wife working as a quasi-carpenter. However, just like Josefa, Nancy, too, emphasizes that she does not consider herself to be a carpenter. She laughs and then, quite paradoxically in relation to her earlier statement about being Mrs. Carpenters, she says: “I mean, we’re not men, you know!”



Josefa in action

In line with Judith Butler's classic theory on the discursive performance of gender (1988), it is possible to observe how gender turns into a symbolic construction constituted through everyday discourse and bodily practices in the cooperative. As a symbolic construction – that is, as a malleable and situated understanding and expression of, in this case, femininity vs masculinity– the idea of gender is highly context-specific. It acquires different configurations that are contingent upon the conditions that frame the expression, whether that expression be discursive or embodied (Butler 1988; Hopp 2015). In the cooperative, the diverse performative conditions vary. First, they encompass the very act of using e.g. heavy woodwork machinery often associated with masculinity, strength, and physical construction (also so-called men's work). Second, they are repeatedly recreated through trust relations among the women; trust that is built upon a shared recognition of the relative subversive-ness of their 'manly work' as women. Third, the very cooperative itself –the community that constitutes it– offers both a physical and symbolic space where the women can freely chat about their families and other members' families (and especially the families of those who are absent that day) as much as their choices of design and color for their products –while at the same time using hand saws, chisels, and paints and brushes. This creates performative conditions that further not only the abovementioned trust relationships but also a sense of solidarity. And as the workers' narratives suggest, that sense of solidarity undergirds (to varying degrees) their entrepreneurial aspirations.

To illustrate the changing situations that contextualize varying expressions of femininity, womanhood, and their meaning, I return to Nancy's comments in the machine hall. To begin, she responds to my joke about her appearing to be Mr. Carpenter by saying that she's *better* than that – she is *Mrs.* Carpenter. A few moments later, she says that she does not deem herself a

carpenter; after all, she is not a *man*. It seems that within a framework of practice, i.e. as she uses the large sawing machine, she feels comfortable affirming her femininity, as if being empowered by the very act of using the machine on her own. On the other hand, subsequently in the discursive context of our general chitchat, she affirms her feminine identity indirectly through negation (“we’re not men!”). Therein also lies the embedded assumption that the carpentry work she has just conducted with the machine is, indeed, masculine work, and hence she is not a carpenter.

The relationships of trust facilitate more intimate conversations and confessions among the workers. With Teresa, Josefa, and Nancy, I had the privilege to build a relationship that allowed us to comfortably share personal stories and problems with each other. They were articulate regarding their own political views, entrepreneurship and also keen on hearing about my research at other sites. In short, they engaged with me from the very start in ways that invited me to get to know them better and also beyond the workshop. With the other workers I remained more distant in terms of my personal relationship with them (those relationships were also good but more formal), and learnt less about their intimate life stories directly from them. Indirectly, however, I learnt a lot. Gossip in the cooperative seemed to run rife, being somewhat at odds with the continuously expressed sense of trust the workers say they felt with each other. In any case, the stories I heard from others –especially from Teresa and Nancy–, were telling of how trust operated (and was operationalized) among the women. For the most part, the stories they tell each other in confidence concern marital problems. I learnt, for example, that Sofia’s husband, who runs the shop in the morning when Sofia is in the cooperative, is an alcoholic and occasionally physically abusive. He has once broken Sofia’s jaw. Nancy tells me that as a child, María, a particularly timid yet steadfast worker in the cooperative, was a victim of sexual abuse

by one of her family members. And from Teresa I hear that Nancy's husband is a chronic cheater but because Nancy is an evangelist, she keeps on forgiving him. I sense that by virtue of being a community of women, there is more "space" to cultivate these kinds of interpersonal relationships, however much they may not always be as insular as one might hope. Further, the cooperative as a physical and symbolic framework for gender expressions constitutes a safe space where the manual work serves as background noise that sets the scene for constant banter and chatting:

[Nena is talking about her grandson who is a six-year old first-grader]

- Nooo, you know, he's a troublemaker, doesn't listen to anybody, not me, not his mom, not even his dad! ...[Laughs] Yesterday the neighbor told me that Agu [the grandson] had found some spray paint in his [the neighbor's] garage, can you believe it, the kid went and painted blue spots on their patio! Laura [Nena's daughter] wanted to whack Agu, and she should've!

[Sofia]

- At least it was blue, boys' color, you know, pink paint and they'll think your grandson is gay.

[Teresa, laughs over everybody else's voices, and then mumbles something about a transvestite who had bought an egg holder from her, similar to one she had sold to me at a fair some months earlier.]

Josefa next to me is painting a wall decoration, the word "love" cut out of a wooden board. She is using a combination of greens and reds and some glitter. While Nena, Sofia and Teresa continue their exchange of children and grandchildren-related battle stories, I ask Josefa if she thinks about colors in relation to gender. I know the topic is something Josefa will gladly entertain and indeed, she quickly replies saying she does not believe in blue being for boys and pink for girls. However, having photographed many of the artifacts she has made, I can attest to them following a clear chromatic logic where different tones of red, pink, fuchsia, lilac etc. are the colors she most commonly uses. Jewelry boxes, candle holders, wall decorations (such as the

one she is painting), napkin holders, etc., all painted with various hues of red, presumably meant for female consumers. I conclude this based on how most of those buy and commission work from the cooperative are apparently women.

On a different Wednesday morning, there are eight of us sitting at the large worktable in the workshop, each immersed in different stages of work, whether painting, sawing, or gluing the object in their hands. The conversation turns to Darío, a young man who had joined the cooperative for a couple of months about half-a-year earlier but never came to work more than twice a week, at most. Then he was asked to leave. I ask Teresa next to me whether I had met him. “Oh you’d remember him if you had met him, he’s got the ugliest cleft lip in Santiago,” she says and laughs loudly. I realize I do, indeed, remember Darío. As if grunting through her teeth, Josefa, who sits diagonally in front of me says the Darío is a *machista de mierda* (a fucking machista) who did not understand cooperativism; he was also “zero entrepreneurial.” Teresa, a little more diplomatic than Josefa (although not in her description of Darío’s facial features), says he is just a typical man from Huaicohondo, the neighborhood he lives in. “I know his parents as well, and Pancho [Teresa’s husband] knows his father,” she says. “What is a typical man from Huaicohondo?”, I ask. Josefa, who has never lived anywhere near Huaicohondo, looks at me and says that they are the kinds of *negros* that make all poor seem delinquent, and that because of them, in Santiago there is discrimination. She continues: “He’ll probably beat up his wife when he gets married, but I hope he’ll never get married, I mean, poor woman!” Teresa laughs in a way that now threatens others’ hearing and says that given Darío’s horrible cleft lip, he will never get married. Not even the poorest woman in Huaicohondo would want to marry a man who looks like him, she says. It is easy to detect the subtle –and not so subtle– references to gender and gender roles that surface in these exchanges.

In a workspace where the women may challenge the widely shared, rigid conceptions of masculine and feminine forms of labor, they also reconfirm and even perpetuate different kinds of dichotomizing gender associations. I often heard the workers discuss their choices of color in reference to who could potentially use or want the object(s) they had painted. It was evident there was a consensus on pink being for girls and blue for boys. Similarly, conversations concerning couples and marriages would often conceal a deeply ingrained understanding that women, who represent similar socioeconomic sectors as the workers, *must* marry men with more money for their own benefit. In other words, while some of the workers felt empowered as women upon questioning the masculinity inherent in their trade, they also deemed it only natural that *other* women depend economically on their husbands.

The cooperative fosters different kinds of practice-oriented and discursive environments in which gender is both bodily and verbally performed. But where does this leave the question of entrepreneurialism? Is *becoming* or *being an entrepreneur* for the cooperative women, given all the attributes associated with entrepreneurialism, fundamentally about discovering and mobilizing their sense of agency? The workers' self-identification as entrepreneurs is linked to the cooperative environment which allows them to further their business-oriented activities both in and outside the cooperative. It also enables them to envision themselves as people whose entrepreneurialism does not confine them in the realm of business-oriented profit making. Instead, they feel potentiated as students and future professionals, and also as mothers and grandmothers of a generation whose future prospects they want to improve. The workers weave together their aspirations for economic and professional growth as entrepreneurs, their role as partners and mothers, and their agency to challenge hegemonic understandings of masculinity in relation to their labor. To deem themselves entrepreneurs affords them a sense of flexibility that

can accommodate the diverse permutations of their gender and gendered labor identities. The cooperative offers protective boundaries within which the performative practices of gender and labor become packaged as entrepreneurialism. And while being entrepreneurial in this context may imply being daring (e.g. defying gender roles in manual labor), flexible (e.g. negotiating business, cooperative, and family time), and creative (e.g. innovating new designs), the cooperative offers an environment of stability and solidarity that potentiates the workers as entrepreneurial women and woman entrepreneurs.







Sofia making napkin holders

The *Cooperativa Integral de Santiago del Estero* serves as a laboratory to examine how entrepreneurial practices and subjectivities, cooperative-based generation of economic capital, and gendered labor identities intertwine. In this chapter, I have discussed how the cooperative offers its members an environment that can potentiate them as entrepreneurs beyond the economic restrictions imposed by *Argentina Trabaja*. It can also cultivate their aspirations to become (or have their children and grandchildren become) professionals whose career need not be tied to federal employment plans and support. Undoubtedly the program *Argentina Trabaja*, which determines the cooperatives' line of work, the members' institutional rights, and also their wages, merits to be problematized and criticized. Despite its noble mandate of social inclusion and the reduction of unemployment and informal labor, it does not cease to be a program that essentially restricts the participants' economic growth. With the salary the program offers for the cooperative members being less than the national minimum wage, one can hardly describe



*Argentina Trabaja* as breeding ground for future millionaires. Further, given that it prohibits the cooperative members from carrying out additional formal work, the meagerness of the salary drives many workers to seek additional *informal* work – that is, to perpetuate the existence of precarious labor which is precisely what *Argentina Trabaja* attempts to eradicate. However, as I have discussed in this chapter, working in the Cooperative Integral potentiates its members in a myriad of ways other than simply economically.

The cooperative cultivates a sense of entrepreneurialism which allows the workers to project into the future whether as business-owners, students, or professionals. Since 2012, when the cooperative was founded, its members have worked towards acquiring skills they previously did not have. Related to their daily labor in the workshop, they have mastered their skills in carpentry, painting, and design. Outside the workshop, they have learnt –and continue to learn– business management and product promotion. And still some have participated in specific professionalization courses, earning diplomas in bakery and confectionary industry or in the field of cosmetics –skills they can capitalize on should they move onto the labor markets beyond the confines of the cooperative. Working in the Cooperativa Integral has not made any of its members wealthy. Yet it has introduced a sense of economic stability in their lives that also implies access to social security and an accruing pension plan. As my informants readily acknowledge, it is not only the social aspect of their cooperative work that empowers them. Their empowerment also springs from the (relative) security and stability provided by a monthly income the cooperative work itself offers, and the work experience and novel skills this stability has enabled them to build and discover.

The members see their cooperative as an enterprise which also gives them the license to call themselves entrepreneurs – as Belén says, they are there to do business. For some of the

women, to self-identify as an entrepreneur stands in stark contrast with their other, previous labor identities. The majority of the women have worked in the past as domestic workers; some still do, in spite of it being prohibited by the rules of *Argentina Trabaja*. The transition from an *empleada* to an *emprededora* is a passage from having another person as the ‘owner’ of one’s work to appropriating one’s own work and thus becoming one’s own boss. The transition is also legal and regulated: it turns hitherto institutionally ‘invisible’ citizens into documented, formally contributing members of the society. If the job security of an undocumented domestic employee rests on a complex web of relations of dependency and affect, for a documented worker that job security is mediated by a set of laws and institutional rules. The cooperative provides the institutional and formal labor context that buttresses the workers’ understandings of themselves as entrepreneurs and entrepreneurial women.

Finally, the cooperative is also a site for diverse gender performances that are as much embodied as they are discursive. Following feminist theory concerning the situated-ness of gender and its malleability as a social construct, I have argued that in the cooperative, the workers affirm their “female power” (*poder femenino*, as Josefa calls it) through partly engaging in a highly masculine form of labor – carpentry. Yet at the same time, in the everyday conversations at the workshop, gender roles are recycled in ways that echo socially shared imaginaries (in Santiago) on what women should be and how they should act like. As an all-women’s workspace, the cooperative does not necessarily cultivate contradictory understandings of what it means to be a woman, an entrepreneur, a cooperative worker, and a person engaging at once in carpentry and in handicrafts. What it does is to expose the context-specificity of how the workers express their gendered labor identities and imbue them with meaning.

“Things are going from bad to worse, it’s just horrible,” Josefa says as Teresa, she, and I are having mate at Teresa’s place and discussing Argentina’s current economic situation. “Thanks to that Macri, that son of a bitch, we’ll have another 2001 before 2020!”, she continues. “What do you think will happen to the cooperative?,” I ask. Teresa laughs loudly and says that if Macri kills their cooperative, they’ll continue on their own, independently. “The machinery is ours, we don’t have to return it to anybody. And I’ll tell you more, I’ve already been talking to people from the Cultural Center, to see if we could get a fixed place to sell our products in their store. Who knows, we might become famous! I mean, our work will be famous.” Josefa takes a more severe tone and says that she does not want to waste everything she has accomplished with the cooperative. But if the cooperative dies, she knows she will find ways to “progress.” “It’s not only about if you are able to make money or not, it’s about the mentality, not being poor in the mind. So I’ll find ways and I’ll continue fighting.” The way Josefa says it sounds like a call to arms. And then she says: “see, I’m an entrepreneur,” and laughs.





## Chapter 5: Cultural capital, status, and legitimacy: mixed-race *Santiagoños* in higher education

### Introduction

This chapter examines the intersections between cultural capital, socioeconomic mobility, and race in the context of higher education. I focus on Santiago's public university, *la Universidad Nacional de Santiago del Estero* (from here on UNSE), where I worked both as a visiting researcher<sup>82</sup> and an ethnographer from August 2016 until the end of December 2017. I discuss the concrete and symbolic significance of education for three students who self-identify as *criollos* or *mezclas* at UNSE. Through their life histories and everyday experiences in the university, I analyze how the acquisition of cultural capital shapes their aspirations for socioeconomic mobility. This chapter also closes the set of case studies I present in this dissertation. Upianita as a site introduced me to the relationship between race and entrepreneurialism and allowed me to start examining social mobility in Santiago through the lens of both. At Ironsport triathlon club, I focused on social and physical capital and how being an athlete provides one with esteemed status currency. That status currency is pivotal in how young *becarios* (sponsored athletes) imbibe (middle-class) lifestyle references and navigate different social spaces with aspirations to experience upward mobility. My research in the women's cooperative turned towards cooperative entrepreneurialism. I examined how cooperative work could lead to business practices, which, in turn, would help the cooperative workers in improving their economic –and social– position. In the cooperative, I could also observe how gender played into the workers' collective and individual business activities and affected their self-identifications as entrepreneurs. At all these sites, I first thought the question

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<sup>82</sup> My institutional affiliation with UNSE was crucial for obtaining my temporal residency in Argentina. Argentine immigration laws and policies are incredibly unstrict, and it was not necessary for me to even consider applying for a visa – I was directly able to apply for temporal residency with the right to work.

of race would be an independent variable of sorts; one I could firmly anchor all the rest of the research angles on. However, empirical evidence suggested otherwise. Instead, it showed that race as a concept –and an identity– was as malleable and situational as class or understandings of social mobility on the whole. It was hidden, exhibited, talked about, or dismissed in different ways in different contexts.

At UNSE, I was able to observe and analyze the flexibility of (ethno)-racial identities, and the meanings of between being mixed-race and being in an institution that historically privileges middle-classness. Cultural capital –in this case higher education– is invaluable status currency. Yet educational achievements in Santiago are rarely associated with mixed-race people –if anything, the connection is surprising. This is not necessarily the case with athletes, whose athletic-ness (physical prowess) is currency that can help one navigate or challenge the frontiers of class and race. Similarly, forming part of a cooperative as a criollo is hardly news, since the state-promoted cooperative programs are destined to people with scarce economic resources, and in Santiago, having scarce economic resources all too often correlates with being criollo. UNSE, on the other hand, unfolds as a site where being mixed-race is much more contested. There criollos must constantly orient themselves in a maze of social expectations and pressures that link to the possession and accrual of cultural capital in an institutional setting that historically has excluded criollos. At the same time, they must manage the economic strains that being a student implies.

The relationship between education, social mobility and race is a topic that social scientists have considered at great length in different cultural and geographical contexts. The scholarly research probes into, for example, working class students' access to higher education (Lareau 2003; Reay 2004; Reay et al. 2001), minority students' school performance (Hong &

Youngs 2008; Yosso 2005), and education as a reproducer of cultural capital and class hierarchies (Atkinson 2012; Bourdieu & Passeron 1990; Landers 2019). What consistently shines through these studies is the argument that despite efforts to democratize education (across the world), schools still serve as institutions that maintain class differences and social inequality. This echoes Bourdieu's theory on cultural capital and, more specifically, Bourdieu and Passeron's famous paradigm of social reproduction. As I discuss in the second (theory) chapter, the authors' book, *Reproduction* (1990), argues that high volume of cultural capital tends to generate inter-generational symbolic and linguistic mastery of cultural knowledge, practices, and participation. Cultural capital can be understood as a kind of family endowment that conceals an understanding of one's class position and helps to consolidate social hierarchies through class habitus.<sup>83, 84</sup> It congeals especially in one's (inherited) competence to linguistically express her cultural understandings and preferences and knowledge of the world (Bourdieu 1986). This ability serves as an asset as one enters, for example, secondary and tertiary education. The family's possession of cultural capital can therefore predetermine intergenerational educational prospects and possibilities, which, in turn, further relations of power in different social spaces and between them. In Bourdieu's view, educational institutions function as gate keepers that presume a certain level of cultural capital among the pupils from the start, thereby making it

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<sup>83</sup> Bourdieu referred to cultural capital as a form of embodied capital; that is, the knowledge, tastes and even values and principles that agents carry within themselves without necessarily doing so consciously. Further, it also refers to the material culture people surround themselves with. The idea of one's class is sutured onto objects and items, for example musical instruments, certain kinds of design objects, foods, or household ornaments. As such, they can speak about agent's level of education, cosmopolitan-ness, and knowledge (e.g. Bourdieu 1986).

<sup>84</sup> I have discussed Bourdieu's concept of habitus in the second chapter, where I lay out the theoretical foundations of my research. Here it suffices to say, that habitus refers to one's birth context, a set of dispositions, understandings of the world and one's place in it, and the logic by which the agent organizes and structures her social surroundings. At the same time, the agent's life is structured and conditioned by the very world around her, whether its institutions or other agents. It reveals the interplay between agency and structure and embodies how power is originated, instrumentalized and contested, and used for dominance. Habitus is what constitutes (and marks) one's place in the social space and also her class status.

more difficult for lower class students to succeed to begin with. It follows that schools, despite being fairly autonomous institutions and operating on the assumption of meritocracy, perpetuate class differences. In that vein, the reproduction thesis posits that social classes act in ways that reproduce, generation after generation, the existing social structure –usually for their own benefit. It is the family’s cultural endowment combined with educational potential and achievements that keep this process going. Educational institutions, then, serve as hosts (and not only gatekeepers) that concretize that intergenerational inheritance in the form of educational achievements (e.g. high school diplomas, university degrees, post-graduate degrees, etc.).

Critics que Bourdieu and the theory of *reproduction* largely agree that education in itself does not necessarily remedy social inequalities. Where they disagree on is what are the mechanisms behind the failure of education –and especially higher education– to mediate social mobility. In the United Kingdom, David Goldthorpe has spearheaded the sociological analyses on the relationship between class (in)mobility and education, and together with his colleagues has written extensively on the factors that perpetuate socioeconomic inequality (Breen & Goldthorpe, 1997; Bukodi & Goldthorpe, 2013; Goldthorpe, 2012; Jackson et.al. 2007). Cultural capital, Goldthorpe argues, is in itself a too narrow and deterministic concept to think about class differences. It follows that to examine education and social mobility, we must first unpack the concept of class and identify in it the particular factors that orient educational opportunities and performance. One of principal such factors is parents’ employment. The family’s labor context is much more likely to determine students’ educational choices and outcomes; not their cultural capital or necessarily their previous educational achievements. These choices are made on the basis of a cost-benefit analysis (i.e. making choices on the basis of what leads to best job/economic outcome), which Breen and Goldthorpe (1997) point as empirical support for



rational action theory. That said, cultural capital should not be ignored either. But it should be understood in terms of status and not class, and therefore deemed as separate to ‘hard,’ economic and labor market-related factors that reflect in students’ educational attainment across social classes. This is not surprising given that the aforementioned authors all align themselves with the Weberian framework of class analysis and thus separate the concept of class from the concept of status.

In my research at UNSE, I consider higher education –turned into cultural capital– as status currency and also as a platform to aim for socioeconomic growth. While this could be said to apply to all sectors of the society, for criollos it is especially important given that for them, going to the university has historically been and still is anything but the norm. That said, I recognize that cultural capital serves as an important engine for reproducing social hierarchies and power relations. In an economically and socio-culturally polarized context such as Santiago, especially higher education has historically been a privilege of the elites. And the elites have been defined by both their (generational) economic standing and their geographical (especially European) origins. Still today, the difference of educational attainment between for instance those from Santiago the city and the province’s interior is enormous. To access higher education from the interior is not simply a matter of economic barriers (the cost-benefit analysis Breen and Goldthorpe discuss). The cultural barriers, namely, the ethno-racial hierarchization and discrimination, also deter access to institutions offering tertiary degrees. Similar discriminatory – whether class or race-based– patterns exist in the city, where especially universities<sup>85</sup> are seen as

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<sup>85</sup> Other tertiary degrees institutions, especially *profesorados*, i.e. academies to become a teacher, are generally more inclusive. There is no statistical data to support this. However, based on my observations and my informants’ accounts, there is a consensus that universities are more selective than, say, *profesorados* and also the course of studies is generally 5 years while in *profesorados* it is 4 years. Historically, the saying goes, in Santiago there are three ways to become middle-class: to study to become a police, to get a job in the public administration, or to study to become a teacher. This partially explains why studying in the *profesorado* is particularly popular among students from working class backgrounds who aspire to obtain a higher education degree.

selective institutions that “not everybody can access,” as one of my informants at UNSE meaningfully said.

Yet there are exceptions to this. It is those exceptions that this chapter probes into as it examines *how*, given the surrounding social structures, some criollos are able to capitalize on their accruing cultural capital to reach towards upward mobility. In the following pages, I analyze criollos’ attitude towards higher education not through the lens of socioeconomic *reproduction* but through the lens of cultural capital *production*. Although higher education institutions undoubtedly serve as (re)cycling centers for socioeconomic class differences, they can also potentiate mixed-race people in their aspirations to ascent in Santiago’s socioeconomic ladder. The growing presence of mixed-race students in the university is in itself a social phenomenon that is partially attributable to Santiago’s economic growth. It also correlates with structural transformations that are reshaping the social territories of inclusion and exclusion, such as generational differences in job prospects or globally modeled lifestyle aspirations that cross class-race lines. Finally, since the beginning of this century, universities across the country have adopted policies to increase diversity in the classrooms. These efforts are not articulated in terms of racial inclusion – Argentina takes no census data on people’s racial identification. They focus instead on tackling socioeconomic inequality and incentivizing ethnic minorities and indigenous students to access higher education (Rezaval 2008). Concomitantly they also encourage students from the interior of the poor northern provinces to obtain tertiary degrees (Chiroleu 2009; Nuñez 2013; Ossola 2016). As a result of the inclusion politics, universities have begun to offer courses on “interculturality.” UNSE is so far the only university in the country that offers an entire degree program on interculturality and bilingual education. None of this, of course, means that ethno-racial minorities’ access to higher education would be easy or that higher education would

succeed in erasing the historical axes of difference of class and race. In fact, many of these studies begin by acknowledging the stark division between minority students' educational attainment and that of others. Yet the very fact that scholars have started to pay attention to education in relation to race and ethnicity, and especially so in Argentina, where mythically all people came from the ships and are therefore white, indicates development in that field of research. This chapter borrows from that research as much as it intends to add to it. Thinking about the meaning of education as cultural capital and approaching it through the lens of race provides insight to how that capital potentiates social mobility among the racial(ized) *other*.

My key informants, whose stories this chapter consists of, represent different ways in which cultural capital can translate into social mobility. For example, where one connects studies and university life with his own business endeavors, for another, the university's intellectual environment serves as a springboard to political militancy. Furthermore, where some do their best to 'deracialize' themselves within the university, others turn race into a shield and an arm against what they perceive as social injustices. Thus, the individual narratives of present experiences in the university and future aspirations differ in their content. But what they all share are wider socioeconomic and racial conditions, family backgrounds, and understandings of the importance of achieving a higher education degree. In contrast to the two previous chapters, this one places the concept of entrepreneurialism in a secondary plane. I often asked my informants about their understandings of entrepreneurialism, especially after I had already started doing research at Ironsport and the Cooperative. I also discussed the topic with my colleagues in the university, from whom I got many ideas as to how to approach the concept in my other field sites. In a way, I was hoping that UNSE, too, would reveal a landscape inhabited by young 'life entrepreneurs,' who use the word as the primary adjective to describe themselves. This was not

the case. Although some of the business students whom I met and interviewed conversantly employed the term in their narratives about themselves, for the most part, it simply did not come up spontaneously. However, some of my informants did use it in the context of their parents, calling especially their mothers ‘entrepreneurial.’ Again, as in the cooperative, I found myself struggling with the double-entendre of the Spanish word *emprendedor/a*. Usually my informants’ mothers would be domestic employees or homemakers. Thus, were they *emprendedoras* for their side activities as, for instance, informal bakers (e.g. selling *empanadas* from home)? Or were they *emprendedoras* for their fighter attitude and the unassailing goal to put their children into a university? I did listen to how my informants’ would conceptualize entrepreneurialism and how they related it to today’s political and economic climate. But I also understood that it simply would not serve as the most effective vehicle to discuss cultural capital, race and social mobility in the context of higher education. Thus, this chapter follows the previous ones in terms of its focus on capital in terms of aspirations for social mobility within a specific social field. It does not, however, consider entrepreneurialism as a central piece in the puzzle, nor does it attempt to draw a relationship between entrepreneurialism and cultural capital.

### **Chapter structure**

The following pages are divided into four different sections. First I introduce my work site at UNSE, the *Laboratorio de Antropología* and my colleagues whose input in this dissertation in general and this chapter in particular has been invaluable. The second section explores the relationship between (higher) education and class and race in Argentina. Despite public and political discourses suggesting the contrary, social scientists argue that rather than reducing inequality in a society, universities in fact perpetuate class differences (Atkinson 2012,

2015, Egerton and Halsey 1993, Reay et al. 2001). Further, in racially diverse cultural contexts, the perpetuation of class differences correlates with a further reification of racial categories. In that sense, universities can hardly be seen as incubators of socioeconomic equality. As I analyze these arguments, I draw from the history of higher education in Argentina and its role in creating hierarchical class-race structures that still continue in place. In that context, I also discuss the history of UNSE, and what university education has meant and continues to mean in Santiago.

The third section concerns the symbolic significance of being a university student and the prospect of obtaining a higher education degree. I focus on two students, Fátima and Jorge, who study at UNSE's Humanities, and Health and Social Sciences faculty. As students of intercultural education (*Educación Intercultural*) and sociology, respectively, they have chosen career paths that are far from certain in terms of job prospects. Through Fátima's and Jorge's narratives, I explore the meaning of degrees in social sciences that hardly guarantee a secure livelihood, but which offer students a fertile ground to position themselves ideologically in relation to surrounding social issues. Fátima's and Jorge's interests lie in intercultural pedagogy and working with underprivileged people, and in political activism. Their understandings of the importance of higher education are intimately linked to their self-identifications as racially mixed non-*gringos*. Further, their awareness of their families' socioeconomic position resonates strongly in how they construct their sense of self as persons capable of moving away from Santiago's social margins.

In the fourth section, I discuss the relationship between cultural and economic capital through the case of Matías. As a third-year accountancy student and with his own small enterprise dedicated to painting, plastering, and dry-wall building, Matías exemplifies a person who turns cultural capital directly into a business asset. He is driven by an overt desire to make

money and make use of the university as a socio-educational platform to foment his business endeavors. Moreover, he is acutely aware of his socioeconomic position vis-à-vis his peers: he is a son of a single mother who works as a domestic employee; his youth was marked by drugs and delinquency, and as he himself says, he is a *criollo*, “*y a los criollos en Santiago se los discrimina*” (and in Santiago, *criollos* are discriminated against). As I analyze Matias’s narratives, I also draw from conversations I had with his mother. Their voices illustrate a value system in which higher education and economic growth are causally linked together and as such, inseparable.

### **Laboratorio de Antropología, Universidad Nacional de Santiago del Estero**

Public smoking has been prohibited in Argentina since 2011, but Luís does not care. He, Carlos, Pancho, and I are hanging out in our shared office at the *Laboratorio de Antropología*, a research unit lodged in the UNSE’s School of Humanities and Health and Social Sciences. Gesticulating with a cigarette in his hand, Luís, 62, tells me about Domingo Bravo who used to be the Laboratorio’s director in the 1980s and 90s. Professor Bravo was a teacher, a historian, a poet, and a *quichuista*, i.e. a person who speaks and is committed to safeguarding the language and keeping it alive. He was also a *criollo* who came from the province’s interior, made a career in academia, and who still, according to Luís, was always deemed first a *criollo* and only then, a professor and an academic. We are discussing the role of the university as a ‘whitening institution,’ throwing back and forth ideas about what it means, and whether it really is that or not. After his anecdote about professor Bravo, Luís puts out his cigarette (against the hinge on the door frame) and says that despite all the social changes, with a university degree or not, in Santiago a *negro* is still a *negro*; a *criollo* is always a *criollo*.

Luís comes from a well-known family that has formed part of Santiago's social elite and intelligentsia for generations. The family is also known for its political connections and activism—Luís himself was a political prisoner for seven years, between 1978 and 1985.<sup>86</sup> Although he studied computer science in the late 1980s, he has dedicated his professional career to talking, writing, and teaching about human rights, whether these be related to state terrorism, indigenous peoples, or landownership. He co-directs the Laboratorio with Carlos, 39. Carlos received his Ph.D. in history from the University of Tucumán three years earlier. When I started working at the Laboratorio, Carlos had just published his first book in which he discusses indigeneity and ethnic identity formation in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century Santiago.<sup>87</sup> Like Luís, Carlos also deems the public smoking ban a fatal error in the federal legislation. He often walks around the Laboratorio smoking a pipe and even more often, instead of smoking, simply carrying it in his hand. If Luis is a straight-forward, practical person with categorical political opinions and little filter in how he articulates them, Carlos is the opposite. With his pipe, his soft voice and a penchant for talking at great length rather than listening to others, Carlos embraces his identity as an academic and an intellectual.

Pancho, 31, is the Laboratorio's administrative assistant. He is a jack-of-all-trades whose responsibilities range from creating a virtual catalogue of the Laboratorio's physical collection to ensuring there's always yerba for the mate and hot water in the thermos bottle. Pancho is also a

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<sup>86</sup> The Argentine political context in the late 1960s was rapidly becoming highly polarized and violent. Subversive leftist movements were emerging in different parts of the country. Santiago del Estero was no exception to this. The authoritarian provincial government took harsh measures against leftist political activists. Luís formed part of one activist group who were known for their sabotage work in the province's interior and connections to guerrilla groups operating elsewhere in Northern Argentina. Luís never told me the full story of his capture, but what he did tell was that all of the members in his uni" were detained, tortured, and incarcerated in a prison some two hours from Santiago. Importantly, while his imprisonment happened during the military dictatorship, in Santiago, the governing powers remained authoritative and repressive even after the return to democracy in 1983. This explains Luís's later release from the prison.

<sup>87</sup>*Memories and Indian Alterities. Discourses and indigenous traces in Santiago del Estero's rural areas* (2016, my translation.)

musician, a visual artist, a 3<sup>rd</sup>-year student in the social work program, and Luís's son. He is acutely aware of his social position among Santiago's elites yet also cognizant of the sociocultural and racial realities surrounding him. Further, while evidently reluctant to challenge his father, Luís, in front of others, Pancho holds onto his views even when they do not coincide with Luís's and Carlos's axiomatic statements concerning the way the world works. This becomes evident the day after Luís's and my conversation about the universities' role as whitening institutions or as platforms for social mobility. Pancho's perspective differs from that of his father. He tells me about his mixed-race peers in his social work program. "My old man is mistaken," he says. "Maybe many people, especially those from a different generation, still think that a *negro* is always a *negro* and criollos will always be poor. But *they* [referring to the mixed-race people] don't necessarily see themselves as such, and they think university is as much theirs as others."

I have known Luís, Carlos, and Pancho since 2015, when I first contacted Carlos to inquire about the research they do at the Laboratorio. When a year later I went back to Santiago to start my fieldwork, it was Carlos and Luís who invited me to form part of their research group as a visiting scholar. This did not only imply my having an institutional affiliation necessary for obtaining a temporal residency in the country. It also meant a chance to become part of a professional community with shared interests and ample opportunities to converse, listen, and learn. Above all, it offered me natural access to a field site where on one hand, I worked as an academic and on the other, as an ethnographer. I started at UNSE in September 2016. I was given a workspace consisting of a half-a-desk and a chair in the Laboratorio's main office, and it seemed like a good idea that I would go there at least two or three times a week. The Laboratorio itself occupies the upper quarter of a long two-story building that faces the faculty's interior



quad. Besides a few classrooms and three office spaces that are shared by professors and researchers, there are also two larger classrooms, a derelict kitchenette and a toilet. In the larger rooms, the walls are covered by shelves that display archeological pieces –mainly pottery– collected from the region. The collection is carefully organized and well-kept, and the written information that accompanies it testifies to Santiago’s rich indigenous cultures. The cultural theme continues on the rest of the wall space where images of indigenous art and old maps of Santiago and the North-west decorate the rooms and the hallways. The only issue that makes the everyday life at the Laboratorio at times less pleasant is the lack of air conditioning. During the hottest months, a couple of rickety ceiling fans provide little relief from the 110+ F temperatures.

When I started at UNSE, I thought the university would be a kind of intellectual base where I could both think and talk about my research and find ‘refuge,’ and also take distance from my field sites. But the more time I spent at UNSE, the more evident it became that the questions I was asking about social mobility and race in my other field sites were omnipresent also in the university itself. I therefore started conversing not only with my colleagues but also with the students I became acquainted with about the concerns that motivated my research: how do mixed-race university students negotiate their racial identities within an educational context that historically privileges and associates itself with whiteness? What kind of meaning and significance does accruing cultural capital have in the students’ understandings of their place and their family’s place in the world? And how do they convert cultural capital into status currency in their everyday lives and future aspirations? In order to reach out to different students, I made use of the occasions I participated or lectured in sociology and social science theory classes. I also found informants outside the university, at times in a context that had nothing to do with my

endeavors at UNSE. Both within and outside the premises of the university, I used the snowball method to find more people I could talk with.

What I did not anticipate were the links between my different ethnographic sites that gradually revealed themselves and in which UNSE turned out to be a kind of nexus. To begin with, I met one of my key informants from the Cooperativa at the Laboratorio, in a class where I was giving a guest lecture. I then learnt that *Argentina Trabaja* organized workshops at UNSE in connection with the university's business program, and some of the *cooperativistas* were active participants in these workshops. At Ironsport, one of my non-*becado* informants, Agustín, was the owner of UNSE's canteen that everyday caters to hundreds of students, both on the university's main campus and at another locale a few blocks away. In his contribution to the *becado* system at Ironsport, he both provides free meals to some *becados* and offers work at the canteen to others. Locutor, for example, supported his studies by working there as a waiter. These connections functioned as a series of arteries that were conducive, time after time, to the UNSE. My purpose of going to my 'workplace,' then, often served the double purpose of following and interviewing my informants and staying at the shared office space in the Laboratorio.

### **The university is for everybody. In Argentina, everybody is white**

Matías, one of my key informants in the university, and I are sitting at the Café UNSE (not the same as the *Cantina* UNSE that is owned by Agustín from Ironsport), a small café in the social science faculty's quad. He is telling me about his motivations to enter the university and enthusiastically talks about them through many colorful anecdotes. He gets particularly excited as he starts to tell me about a person he had known as a child, Fernando Medina, who went to

study medicine in Córdoba ten years ago. Five years ago, Fernando came to visit Santiago and in random circumstances met Matías. It had been more than ten years since they had last seen each other. Matías was trying to get off drugs at that point, with varying degrees of success. Perhaps out of pity, Matías says, Fernando invited Matías to come visit him in Córdoba and help him fix his apartment. He would pay for his bus tickets and also for the work he would do in the apartment. Matías, eager for money, did not hesitate and a few days later was on his way to Córdoba, six hours to the south from Santiago by bus.

...And I see this different life he [Fernando] has, an apartment in the center in Nueva Córdoba, in front of the Buen Pastor [a shopping center], near the best places...all kinds of cars, beautiful people...there he talks about trips to Carlos Paz and all that and I see how he lived, I mean, he lives alone in his huge apartment. He has high-level relationships with people and you know, I talked with him about things... I mean, he's a doctor, he knows about things; he has the capacity to study and to graduate. So I decide, I don't care how, I will also do that, start studying and I will be somebody who has the same lifestyle as he has. His dad is a surgeon and they have a mansion in Cabildo [affluent neighborhood in Santiago] – to live like that, I would love it!

“The thing is,” Matías continues, “people like me, we don't go to the university. That's why I'm doing it, I'm showing that I can do the same as all those rich people from Cabildo.” “What do you mean, people like you?”, I ask. “*Negros, criollos*; I'm a *negro* but look at me, look where we're meeting!” When I later go back to listening to the recording from our conversation, I pause after hearing Matías's fateful phrase, “people like me, we don't go to the university.” In just a few words, Matías lays bare the class-race relations that structure people's understandings of whom higher education is meant for and for whom not. The way Matías says it does not echo Paul Willis's (1977) informants who scorn at higher education as proud members of the English working class. Nor does Matías's narration contain any trace of victimization. Instead, his awareness of the structural forces behind “people like him” not going to a university drains his

statement of all drama, turning it into a simple, dispassionate observation of the world he inhabits.

That people like Matías are not supposed to enter in a university evokes at once the concept of symbolic violence and the paradigm of social *reproduction* (Bourdieu & Passeron 1990). The structural forces that organize the society on the basis of power and subjugation perpetuate class divisions. The verticality of such organization implies the subordination of the society's disadvantaged sectors. In the form of a vicious cycle and as if by inflicting violence upon themselves, these sectors of the society then begin to take for granted their place on the bottom ranks of the prevailing social structure (Weiniger 2002). As Mario Diaz, one of my key informants at Ironsport once told me, when he was younger, his peers in his neighborhood did not even consider university as a possibility – they simply did not deem selves fit for it. He also said how in his early teens, he did not even know what the University was, so absent it was from the ideas concerning one's future that his social environment at the time cultivated. Across my different field sites, my informants expressed the difficulties that studying or sending their children to study in a higher education institution implied. The difficulties did not stem only from the material circumstances that complicated one's passage through higher education. They were also rooted in the uncertainties and insecurities immanent in breaking away from poverty and, further, the confines of structural racism. Carlos, once in a conversation, described how this reflected in his *criollo* students' classroom behavior. Many are timid and quiet, he said; "you can read their family backgrounds on their faces." I personally did not participate in classes consistently and frequently enough in order to make such observations. But they were echoed by other professors and by all accounts, seemed plausible. In another conversation, a professor of Quichua in the Laboratorio, Silvia Sosa, told me how hard it had been for her to arrive in the city

twenty years ago, coming from the interior of Santiago. A daughter of a Quichua-speaking mother and a peasant *criollo* father, what helped her in the teachers' academy, ironically enough, is that she did not quite look like her parents: she was fairer. Nevertheless, she had constantly felt anxious about her educational performance and inferior to her peers, many of whom were wealthier urbanites and mostly white.

### **Democratizing education; perpetuating socioeconomic inequality**

Bourdieu and Passeron contend that the preservation of the 'family endowment,' i.e. cultural capital and the understanding on one's class position, hinges upon its inter-generational inheritance. Associating cultural capital with a level of education, 'high-brow culture,' and habits of consumption, they examine how these traits perpetuate class differences and solidify cultural behavior associated with middle-classness. The role of education in this process is instrumental. On the converse side, the self-feeding generational cycles of poverty are the negative reflection of the middle- and upper-class reproduction of cultural capital. In that light, it is difficult to sideline Bourdieu and Passeron's theory, even though in today's context its inherent determinism merits to be scrutinized and even questioned (Reary et al. 2001). In the following, I briefly discuss the origins of university education in Argentina and demonstrate how the mechanisms of class-based, and often elitist forms of cultural capital reproduction were built into the system from the start. The master narrative that describes the 'democratization' of higher education reflects the hegemony and normalization of whiteness in the society. The other history, which describes the racial exclusion within the university world, stays absent from that narrative.

The beginnings of Argentine higher education date back to 1613, the year the University of Córdoba (today, *Universidad Nacional de Córdoba* - UNC) was founded. Among the oldest

universities established in Latin America, the UNC started as a religious institution under the aegis of the Jesuit Church. It remained as such until the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, when it was secularized and passed onto the provincial dominium. The second university in Argentina, la *Universidad de Buenos Aires*, was not founded until 1821. By the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the number of universities in the country had increased to five. Until then, universities were elitist, if not outright oligarchic institutions populated by students with family histories of wealth and social and political power. This, however, began to change as a consequence of the University Reform, a student-led movement which started at UNC in 1918. By then, the mass immigration largely from Europe was at its peak, and the country among the wealthiest in the world. Upward mobility for the arriving immigrants was all but guaranteed, which also entailed a gradual reorganization of the society's demographic structures and power relations. Students, many of whom were daughters<sup>88</sup> and sons of immigrants, were beginning to rebel against the oligarchy in power, and the university was set as the theatre for the rebellion. One of the central motives of the University Reform was to democratize university education. In their intent to modernize higher education, the students demanded legal reforms and governmental autonomy for the universities. This also implied cutting ties with the Catholic clergy<sup>89</sup> (Buchbinder 2012, Tünnennann Bernheim 1998).

In many ways, the student movement was successful and led to substantial changes in the university system in both legal and political sense. Furthermore, with the abolition of tuition

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<sup>88</sup> University doors first opened to women in 1884.

<sup>89</sup> The student rebellion in Córdoba and the ensuing university reform quickly resonated in the rest of the country. Universities across the national territory joined the UNC's cause, thereby adding further pressure on the government with their demands to free the university from the oligarchical rule imposed by the federal government. Moreover, the university reform set the example which many other Latin American countries soon followed. Universities across the region started to revise their statutes and demand legal reforms that would include students and faculty in institutional decision-making processes. Another lasting mark the university reform left is the political activism that still today characterizes many Argentine and Latin American public universities.

fees, higher education became economically less prohibitive (Buchbinder, 2012). Given the nation's accumulating wealth, families across a widening segment of the socioeconomic spectrum started sending their children to schools and then universities instead of fields and factories. It is precisely this period of time, between the 1920s and 1950s, that Argentine scholars tend to deem as the beginning of the famous Argentine middle classes (Adamovsky 2009; Garguín 2012; Germani 1981). The university education became accessible to growing sectors of the society. This, in turn, expanded the professional classes whose superior education degrees and specialized skills facilitated access to prestigious occupations. In the national imaginaries, by the 1950s and especially thereafter, Argentina was a 'middle-class country' with a strong education system that preserved and helped to expand the professional middle sectors. Since in those same imaginaries the university was for *everybody*, in theory *everybody* could ascend socioeconomically by investing in higher education. In truth, however, higher education institutions throughout the country remained as exclusive places whose student population tended to be mostly homogenous in terms of their socioeconomic position (Juarros 2006). In the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the number of universities and by extension, university students across the country grew rapidly (García de Fanelli 2014). Universities themselves also witnessed changes in their internal organization which often linked to larger political and structural phenomena in the society (e.g. dictatorships, economic crises, the return to democracy in 1983). During the economic growth of the early 1990s, the number of university students increased faster than ever before, reflecting once again the correlation between economic conditions and access to higher education.

In Santiago, and generally in the country's northern provinces, the history of higher education differs radically from the story told from the perspective of the urban metropolises.

Still today, Santiago does not perform very well in the national statistics concerning secondary or higher education. According to the National Statistics Institute's report from 2018, 18,9% of the economically active population in Santiago had a tertiary degree.<sup>90</sup> Of the same population bracket, 28,7% had a secondary school diploma without any further studies. As a point of comparison, in the city of Buenos Aires, 40% of the economically active population holds a tertiary degree and 25,5% have not studied further than secondary school –i.e. most of those who are employed have a tertiary degree. In most provincial capitals, with the exception of the Northern region, the percentage of higher education attainment is between 20% and 25% (INDEC 2018). Santiago also experiences low rates of university degree completion across the population (whether employed or not). In 2017, only 30% of university students in Santiago finished their studies. Further, the two universities in the city, the public UNSE and the private Catholic University of Santiago del Estero (UCSE), have very different figures of graduation percentages: at UNSE, 20% of those who start in the university actually obtain a degree while at UCSE that percentage reaches 40%.

The first university in Santiago was the Catholic University of Santiago del Estero which was founded in 1960. UNSE was created thirteen years later. UCSE was a private institution from the start, catering to Santiago's wealthier families. UNSE was public –and it also catered mostly to Santiago's wealthier families. While in the urban centers in the country –Buenos Aires, Córdoba, Santa Fe– and in the Pampas region in general the socioeconomic structures underwent tectonic changes throughout the better part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in Santiago what prevailed was mostly socioeconomic stagnation. Thus, how could university education be democratized if the society itself remained culturally and economically polarized? Moreover, since that polarization

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<sup>90</sup> INDEC, i.e. the National Statistics Institute counts everybody from the age of 14 onwards as potentially economically active.



operated on the basis of race as much as class, and a large majority of Santiagueños were poor mixed-race criollos, logically access to universities was limited to the small ruling *gringo* elites (Ossola 2016).

I did not conduct research at UCSE and knew very few faculty members in that university. However, In May 2017, I accompanied Mario, one of my key informants at Ironsport, to UCSE to give a presentation with him on sports and entrepreneurialism. He used to teach sports nutrition in the university's nutrition program and still regularly visits as a guest lecturer. The classroom where Mario gave the talk, was organized in the form a horseshoe and I took seat among the students, somewhere in the middle. The introductions revealed that most of the students studied economics, a program that UNSE does not offer. Some studied business and accountancy, and a few were students of psychology –another program not available at UNSE. The difference between this group of people and those that I habitually interacted with at UNSE was noticeable. Almost all of the students listening to Mario's lecture seemed phenotypically white; they wore clothes whose brands are easily recognizable; many had iPhones on their desks, and a few had even brought laptops. In Santiago, it is uncommon to see students with laptops in the classes; one rarely sees people working on their laptops in public places in general. Observing the students' appearance, it seemed fair to assume they came from backgrounds of good economic standing. This was not surprising for after all, UCSE is a private university and historically, a site of social exclusivity.

The next day at the Laboratorio, I bring up my experience at UCSE with Luís. Luís is not only a walking encyclopedia of Santiago's history but also impressively knowledgeable of the university life both at UNSE and UCSE. He explains the political and economic circumstances in which UCSE was founded, situating the university's beginnings in a specific historical context.

Luís tells me that the emergence of catholic universities, instituted by secular Catholics with still close ties to the church, was a nation-wide phenomenon around the 1960s (and subsequently again in the 1990s).<sup>91</sup> Although their religious moorings did not necessarily reflect in the everyday university life or the teaching curriculum, their ethos aimed to safeguard “traditional and conservative values.” In a way, just as the students had risen against the conservative oligarchy forty years earlier, some sectors of the society in the 1960s deemed it necessary to oppose the growing political radicalization prevalent in public universities. The very fact that UCSE preceded UNSE by thirteen years is itself telling of the values and norms characterizing Santiago’s society at the time. Then Luís adds that UNSE, despite its being a public institution, has not been much better in terms of its inclusivity. In fact, the democratization of higher education in Santiago is a relatively recent phenomenon, coinciding with the period of national and provincial economic growth. Since democratizing higher education implies making it accessible to people across the socioeconomic spectrum, in Santiago it also means making it accessible across the society’s ethno-racial spectrum.

Today, UNSE has around 11,000 students and five different faculties. The newest of the faculties is the school of medicine, inaugurated in 2014. The student body seems by all accounts diverse and in racial terms, the color scale that characterizes it is tinted with variety. In that sense, it stands in stark contrast with UCSE. Entering UNSE’s main campus and the faculty of social sciences feels like walking into a site of propaganda trench warfare between different political parties and party factions. Activist groups hang their posters and billboards wherever there is just one square inch of free wall space. Alternatively, they simply paint the wall. All this

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<sup>91</sup> During Carlos Menem’s presidency (1990-1999), the country’s initial economic growth also reflected in the growing number of universities and other institutions of higher education in the country, most of which were private. The catastrophic economic crisis that ensued from the neoliberal economic practices of Menem’s governments stalled the growth of universities both in terms of their number and the number of students in them.

is conspicuously absent at UCSE, where student politics do exist, however on a level that is much less visible and not nearly as loud. UNSE offers its students both merit- and need-based scholarships. For many students, these scholarships together with a federal stipend program<sup>92</sup> are imperative for being able to stay in the university. Within the university, the political organizations can also offer social shelter for the disadvantaged students, insofar as their worldviews coincide with the given party line. As Luís would tell me, the different parties, party factions, and organizations often play the role of *terra firma*, in which the participants find the chance to convert discourse into practice and feel themselves part of a potential solution, not the problem. For example, some groups center their agenda on defending indigenous peoples and *campesinos*' land rights. Their fight is against multinational companies who appropriate territory for agriculture on an industrial scale. Others carry feminist banners and work in the province's interior to spread awareness on gender equality especially among uneducated *campesina* women. Still others work in the city's poorest neighborhoods, whether campaigning for public health issues or against domestic violence. In any case, regardless of their concrete agenda, the majority of the political groups draw from socialist principles of economic and sociocultural equality. The central figure in these politics is the student herself. And while the programs and the *modus operandi* vary from group to group, they all fundamentally share the same ethos of promoting the presence of students and the youth in Santiago's and Argentina's civil society. In the following section, I discuss student politics in relation to being a student, and the significance of the university as an environment for doing and participating in politics. The section focuses on Jorge, a student of sociology and a activist for a political group, *Agrupación Mariátegui*.

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<sup>92</sup> *Progresar* program is aimed at students between 18 and 24 years who are finishing their primary, secondary or tertiary education. For students in a higher education institution, the monthly stipend as of 2019 is between 1600 and 4900 pesos (40-120 USD) a month, depending on how far one is with her studies.

### University, militancy, and legitimacy: the case of Jorge

Jorge, 31, is a third-year sociology student. He was born in a La Banda, Santiago's sister city on the other side of the *Rio Dulce*. He says he is a "real *mezclao*" with indigenous and European ancestry –to the extent that he knows. I first met Jorge at the Laboratorio. He was doing a research project on "interculturality and territoriality in the interior of Santiago's province" and Carlos was his faculty adviser. I subsequently met him on many occasions, both in organized interview sessions and informally in the Laboratorio. Although Jorge considers himself a mestizo, his facial features are strikingly similar to Santiago's indigenous peoples. To look like an *Indio* makes him proud, he says.

Here in the [sociology] program, I've become interested in my ancestry, before I wasn't. My family from both sides comes from the *campo*, but my father and his brother moved to Buenos Aires already when my dad was 17 or 18; my uncle had gone there earlier. By then he already knew my mom, they're from the same village. My grandparents were quite progressive, super hardworking; they even had electricity and running water already in the 1960s, theirs was the only house with electricity there. It's because my grandfather had his own water mill, imagine, generating electricity then, in the middle of nowhere. But my grandparents didn't let my mom study, even though she gained a scholarship to go to the *Escuela Normal* here in the city...they wouldn't send her to Santiago by herself. So she never studied...I think it's because of that that she's always wanted us to study, because it would be the only way we could have a better quality of life.

After my dad left us...I don't know what happened with his work, I mean, he worked in the municipality, but they cut his salary and we [Jorge and his mother and brother] didn't receive any money from him, nothing. That time was bad, we didn't even have gas because there was no money to pay the bill. That's when my mother started working as a domestic employee. Then she started making *rosca*s (sweet bread) and sell them in the neighborhood. My mom is a genius, I still don't know how she did it but she always managed to make money enough so we could eat.

Nobody in Jorge's family has studied in the university. Some of his family members are policemen; many have miscellaneous jobs as laborers. Others work for the municipality as petty

administrators. “The women in my family are the strongest people of all,” Jorge says. “But none of them have had the opportunity to grow, that’s the curse of our society.” Most of the women in Jorge’s family are or have worked as domestic employees. “And are they *blanquedas* [documented]? No way in hell.”

Jorge first started studying at UNSE in 2005. At that moment, his family’s economic situation was good enough for him to be able to dedicate time to his studies. The good times did not last for long. His parents’ separation led to an economic situation where not only did Jorge’s mother have to find work as a domestic employee but Jorge, too, had to abandon his studies and start earning. After seven years of laboring as a bus driver, a vegetable seller, and a kitchen helper among other professions, Jorge returned to UNSE. The same year, 2011, he joined the *Agrupación Mariátegui*, a national student-led political group.<sup>93</sup>

I knew some *changos* (dudes) from the *argupación* already before but I wasn’t involved in the militancy. In 2010 or 2011, I’m not sure when, there was a pre-ALAS<sup>94</sup> conference here in Santiago, you know, sociology conference, but the organizers didn’t behave very well...I mean, the university got a lot of money for the organization but they basically just smoked it, it vanished. So since then, we [sociology students] have had a bad reputation. And we also had to fight against that bad reputation when in the Mariátegui we started organizing our first trip to the *Foro Social*<sup>95</sup> in Rosario, in 2012. It was really difficult you know, we’d say we want to organize this trip but in the university they’d say you’re all just going to smoke and drink there, why should we help. And then students from accountancy go and ask for sponsorship to go to some conference and they’re like yeah, take, and take some more [laughs]! But still, despite our bad reputation, we managed to organize the trip and some 60 students travelled, it was wonderful.

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<sup>93</sup> La *Agrupación Mariátegui* is a group that defends students’ rights and, as per its mission statement, aims at transforming higher education from within the universities by making it more diverse, inclusive, and equal. The group does not declare to follow any specific ideological doctrine but their rhetoric (in announcements, social media, university propaganda) is overtly leftist and even the very name comes from a famous Peruvian Marxist, José Mariátegui, died in 1930.

<sup>94</sup> ALAS stands for Asociación Latinoamericana de Sociología. Since 1951, it has organized a biannual conference which in 2011 was held in Recife, Brazil. In many Latin American countries, national sociological associations tend to organize conferences deemed pre-ALAS, whose themes and topics usually relate to the next ALAS conference, whether the same or the following year.

<sup>95</sup> Jorge refers to the *Foro Nacional de Educación para el Desarrollo Social* (National Forum of Education for Social Change), a biennial conference that in 2017 took place in Santiago del Estero.

And it was also during that trip that the group's leadership started to form, become more solid.

I think it was there that I really got into politics and militancy. You know, to hear all these people talk... I, you know, I've always heard people mention the *abuelas de plaza de mayo* but in Rosario, I could be face to face with them. I'd already started reading Marx and Castañeda, I'm not afraid to say I'm a socialist, but it was new to think about socialism and human rights together, that's what I learnt in Rosario. That trip was meaningful.

Jorge returned from Rosario convinced that he should continue his studies in sociology and even more convinced he should continue with his nascent activism.

“The university is not just an academic site of studying, learning and instructing. It's a site of continuous conflict (*campo de conflicto continuo*),” Luís says. I am in the Laboratorio, witnessing a heated conversation between Luís, Carlos and another professor about the upcoming university elections. I am still very unfamiliar with UNSE's political landscape. I therefore only listen and try to understand the different political groups' and candidates' ideological stances through Luís's and Carlos's opinions. Later the same week, I randomly meet Jorge and another activist friend of his, also called Jorge, in the faculty's cafeteria. I sit down with them to drink mate and to chat about the coming elections. If Luís had sounded intense while delivering his opinions, Jorge and Jorge sound outright fiery, as if delivering a call to arms and a command for a revolution. They tell me about their electoral campaign, although the *agrupación* itself, Mariátegui, has no candidate in the elections. Instead, they side with another group who operate under the aegis of a party that does have a candidate. Both Jorge and Jorge the friend use terms such as discrimination, pluralism, hegemony, anti-imperialism, poverty, inequality, etc., while at the same time passionately and wholeheartedly cursing the university's current leadership. Embarrassed by my own ignorance, I confess to them how difficult I find it to understand the university's internal politics and their relationship to outside politics. “Well, you're not the only one, not even all the militants here know what they're fighting or

campaigning for,” Jorge the friend laconically responds. Then Jorge, my prime informant, says how the university is like a direct reflection of everything that happens in the rest of the society; how erroneous are the assumptions that consider the university to be exclusively a place of knowledge production. “This is the place where we form ourselves as citizens (*ciudadanos*), it’s like a micro version of the human universe.”

Luís and the two Jorges together with other student activists, are unanimous about the importance of the university as both an arena of and a mediator for social conflict. For Jorge, the idea of cultural capital is not only about education but also about acquiring knowledge and learning to understand the world of political activism. This does not mean participating in party politics outside the university. Instead, it implies becoming conversant with a specific language of a specific value system, as well as specific behaviors. It means learning a vocabulary that combines academic terminology with the simplicity of political propaganda talk. And it also implies developing practical knowledge, whether administrative or organizational, which translates into skills and practical work “in the field,” i.e. in places where the political groups want to take their politics. From a student activist perspective, then, cultural capital must be understood in relation to the world that surrounds the educational institution and particularly in relation to the constant conflicts and problems inherent in the society. It implies recognizing the resilient relationship between the university as an ideological apparatus of the state and as a site where one can challenge and resist the state.

“You always mention la *causa* (cause), but what are the causes you fight for?”, I ask Jorge in one of our interviews. “Poverty and discrimination,” he immediately responds. He then recalls another *Foro Nacional de Educación* (as the one he had travelled to in Rosario in 2012) where he travelled with *Mariátegui* in 2013:

We were going there with the *agrupación*, in 2013 *Chavismo* was very much on the surface, and I remember how the closing panel was with Venezuelan militants, and it was really emotional as they talked about *Chavismo* and building and new society. It was there in another panel I first had any contact with intercultural and bilingual education, that panel was given by somebody with a degree in education. He talked to us about the violence that the educational system exerts on [indigenous] children...forcing them to speak Spanish or they are discriminated for being *indios*; the teachers tell them off when they don't have notebooks because they can't buy them.

Sara: Well that still happens here in Santiago, in Chaco, Catamarca...

Jorge: It's also because of how they have to fight for their territory, their lands.

Sara: And how is it that this topic impacted you so much?

Jorge: That panel or workshop, I found it very moving...because it wasn't only about discrimination in general...I could imagine how much my dad and uncles must've suffered when they moved to Buenos Aires, and my parents here in the city for being from the interior or for being peasants; for the way they talked or for the way they dressed; for looking the way they do.

Jorge's interest in his own ancestry and more broadly the indigenous cultures and questions of indigenous identity shines through his accounts every time we converse about his academic work. Unlike most of my informants at UNSE, Jorge actually wants to become an academic – rather an investigator than a professor. However, should he become a professor, he would like to teach in the *campo*, among those very communities he sympathizes and also identifies himself with. Jorge considers himself a Marxist. The way he talks about the world, the university, and even his own aspirations reflect an understanding of the society as a set of binaries that pivot around the question of who has power and who does not, and structure and agency as he himself tends to say. The idea of the middle class is a hoax, according to Jorge; a hoax the state has created in order to mask the domination by the ruling classes and to make invisible the suffering of the poor. Further, he deems capitalism and neoliberalism discriminatory economic models that foment racism, which he, in turn, links with poverty. The forceful expropriation of *criollo*



peasants' lands, the stifling of indigenous voices and cultures, and the expansion of industrial farming are, in Jorge's view, satanic evils generated by the capitalist ideology. At UNSE, he is able to participate in a political community where his militancy and activism imbue his experiences of the world's miseries with meaning.

Historically in Argentina, the hierarchies of professional prestige have favored studies in medicine, law, and accountancy/business administration. In Santiago, this has not changed much, although psychology has also become popular. The same tendency exists nation-wide. In 2015, the most popular university programs were: Law, business administration, and accountancy, followed by psychology, education, and medicine. Sociology was number 57, below visual arts, history, and even theatre studies. (Anthropology made it to the position number 87.) Arts and humanities, and some social sciences, offer anything but a safe way towards job security, let alone economic success. So, why would Jorge want to study a subject that implies disassociating the (potential) accrual of economic capital from the purpose of education and acquisition of cultural capital? Given his family history and his family's efforts to ensure Jorge has a better quality of life, what kinds of imaginaries of social status and success drive his educational aspirations?

I study sociology because I think it makes me understand better my own place, you know, my roots, even myself. I mean, I don't think I'll become rich but that's not the point, the point is to fight against inequality. Of course, I don't want to be poor, who does? – I know what it's like! But education is important and to fight for our cause, you must know... understand larger social contexts, and like *el profe* [Carlos], I want to investigate also, not just be a militant. But in this phase, I don't think so much about my own future but *our* collective, the *agrupación*, *compañeros* in the sociology [program]. I don't really say this often but it's also about legitimacy, you know, education gives you legitimacy, especially for us who are discriminated against.

Thinking about cultural capital through its symbolic value offers an alternative for valuing cultural capital based on its potential to lead to socioeconomic mobility. Higher education is

undoubtedly important status currency, especially in a context where only roughly 10% of the all the population has a tertiary degree.<sup>96</sup> But understandings of societal status and success need not be rooted in widely shared imaginaries of economically founded upward mobility. While Jorge is highly conscious of how the society furthers or hinders processes of socioeconomic stratification, in his own account, the question of inequality is as much racial as it is economic. In that sense, being ‘upwardly mobile’ implies highlighting his own ethno-racial identity and using it as both a sword and a shield in his fight for the *cause*. To think of education as cultural capital that potentiates one’s search for ideological identity and challenging of the social structures that sustain the educational system, frees us from thinking about it only in relation to the reproduction of economic and social status. In the next section I discuss Fátima, a student in the program of intercultural education. Unlike Jorge, she is not a activist for any political or ideological cause. Nor is she particularly interested in university politics and student movements in general. But much like Jorge, her background motivates her to study a subject that addresses some of her own identity concerns while at the same time teaching her about her own sociocultural surroundings.

### **University, legitimacy, identity: the case of Fátima**

In May 2017, UNSE hosted the sixth *Foro Nacional para la Educación Social* (National Forum for Social Education). Thousands of university students across the country arrived in Santiago to spend four days in workshops, talks, and other events, many of which were highly political. Carlos and I had organized a panel whose loosely defined topic concerned indigeneity and socioeconomic transformations, race and socioeconomic mobility, and race and education. The paper I presented was titled “*De ser un negro a ser un emprendedor*” (From being a *negro* to

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<sup>96</sup> A rough estimate provided by an economist at UNSE, Federico Scrimini. The estimate is a little skewed though, for it does limit the population to working-age population, like the statistics mentioned earlier in this chapter.

being an entrepreneur). I talked about how entrepreneurialism serves as a lens through which we can observe and study processes of socioeconomic mobility. I also discussed entrepreneurialism as an ethos, practice, and a mentality that allows mixed-race Santiagueños to question and defy historic parameters of race and class. After our session was over, a young woman came up to me. She told me her name was Fátima and that she had found my paper interesting because she could identify with the people whose stories I had talked about. I knew I recognized her from somewhere. It turned out she was a student in the program of Intercultural education and Quichua, and thus also a student of Carlos, who was the director of the program. Fátima and I left the university together and walked to her bus stop. On the way, she told me a bit about herself: she had been born Salta and lived there for the better part of her life, although her family was from Santiago. Her father was a retired policeman; her mother had never worked outside home. She had a younger brother who had died one year and seven months ago. Fátima herself worked as a cleaner in a couple of different houses, earning about 5000 pesos a month, at the time roughly 250USD. She did not have to pay rent for she lived in a house she had inherited from her grandfather. She had just turned 30. As we got to her bus stop, I asked her whether she would be willing to let me interview her. She said she would like that. We agreed to meet sometime the following week.

The Intercultural education program offers a tertiary degree, which in the United States would be the equivalent of something between a bachelor's and an associate degree. The program's full name is *Educación Intercultural Bilingüe con Mención de la Lengua Quichua* – Bilingual Intercultural Education with (a mention of) Quichua Language. On the program's website, it says:

*The program...is designed to form intellectuals and professionals who engage with the development of their people and region, and whose actions contribute to promote...the Quichua*

*language and culture. In particular, the program aims to...form teachers...whose interests lie in designing high-quality educational curricula that support the linguistic and cultural diversity of the region. (My translation.)*

The 3-year program started in 2013 and has grown in popularity ever since. One day in the Laboratorio, I asked Carlos about the typical student profile in program. I had already sat in a few classes among third-year students and had noticed how their overwhelming majority were women. Moreover, their average age could not have been less than 30. Carlos explained to me that the students are, indeed, older than typical university students. Many arrive in the program driven by personal backgrounds and inquiries, after having spent already a number of years in work life. It is not uncommon that the students themselves have Quichua speakers in their families, or roots among indigenous communities in or outside the province. The course comprises of mandatory classes in history, pedagogy, didactics, gender studies, and Quichua. To obtain the degree, the students produce a final project for which they must take a class in research design and methods. (It was in that very class that I met Teresa, the president of the *Cooperativa Integral*.) I heard from Carlos that among those who have already graduated from the program, a few are teachers in schools in the province's interior; some have pursued bachelor's degrees; others have found work in fields unrelated to their studies, and still others have not found work at all. "For many students, this program helps them understand their own identities better, or discover them," Carlos says. "And they do it from an academic perspective, and that for many is empowering."

"My father always wanted me to study," Fátima begins, as I ask her about her educational history at a café where we have agreed to meet for the first interview.

He wanted me to go to a technical secondary school so that I could become an informatics engineer, and then continue my studies in the university. It was a sacrifice, we lived in Salta and had very little money; we lived off my dad's salary as a policeman. I started in the school, but I always failed math! It was really

difficult, and I remember the professor was terrible. He would only tell us that someday we would understand but come the fourth year in the school and we still didn't. The only people in the class who did well were those who had brothers or sisters in the university. So I quit, with just a few subjects pending; I knew it wasn't my thing and I didn't want to do something I knew wouldn't make me feel good. My dad then wanted that I become either a teacher or join the police since he thought they would guarantee a job. But I didn't want to study anything then, I was barely 20 years old, so I started working. I've worked in a clothes shop, a super market, as a guard in a construction site, at a gas stations, as a gym receptionist, a cleaner [laughs]...but I've always known I don't want to study something I wouldn't like as a job. Like I wanted to study, I even enrolled in a program to become a hospital assistant, here at UNSE...I had already moved to Santiago. But you know, after the first few days, just days!, I figured out I wouldn't like to work in a hospital, and that was it. I know many people like me should study to get good jobs, I mean, I know I should do that as well. But I think it's more important that I study something I like even if I have to make financial sacrifices...because its' really difficult today if you don't have good education...but being successful doesn't mean having lots of money or a job in a law firm.

Fátima's narrative is filled with cues that speak of conflicting ideas regarding success and its relationship to education. First, she takes it almost as a given that those who can pass complicated math classes in the secondary school must have (had) family members in the university. Or to put it differently, in Fátima's view it would be surprising that somebody with little educational background in the family could be as successful in school as those with a wealth of inherited cultural capital. Her opinion echoes social scientific findings on first-generation university students and their academic performance and more generally, the *reproduction* thesis.<sup>97</sup> Second, she recognizes that education rescues one from poverty since education is what leads to a "good job." Third, she sees education also as something that should

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<sup>97</sup> In terms of first-generation university students, there is ample research on the topic especially in the United States. Pascarella et al. (2004) examine first-generation college students' academic performance across 18 different institutions, using a sample of over 3000 students. They conclude that the differences in grade between those who are first-generation and those who are not are significant, with the latter performing much better in their schoolwork. Similarly, Laura Nichols in *the Journey Before Us* (2020) examines how first-generation low-income students adjust—or struggle in adjusting—to both public and private university environments. Kerry Landers (2019) focuses exclusively on first-generation students in ivy league universities, where the environments of difference create solidarity on one hand, but also struggles with shame and sense of non-belonging.

provide personal fulfilment; not simply an avenue toward a salaried profession. In her decision regarding her own education, she has chosen to study what she is interested in and not what she thinks she *should* study. I tell her I think she is quite brave. She responds by saying she is probably quite foolish.

That Fátima acknowledges her potential foolishness in choosing a career path that is anything but secure points to a sense of empowerment, as Carlos suggests. Fátima feels empowered to make such a risky choice, despite the expectations of those who surround her and societal expectations writ large. I asked Fátima about her motives, as I did with other students in the same course. Invariably, people said they were motivated to know more about their own and their region's background and culture. When I tried to press them further to find out *why* they would choose to study something that was hardly going to guarantee them a job, the answers became less explanatory. Sometimes the answer was a simple: "*y bueno, me gusta*" – "well, I like it." Other times, the answer came out with more confidence and went along the lines of: "I think it's important that we preserve our culture, which is unique." (Most of the students in the Intercultural education program acknowledged that their chances of getting a job in a related field were not the best. This, however, did not seem to hinder their enthusiasm to continue studying.) Talking with Carlos and Luís, as well as other faculty from the social sciences, I learned that this was a relatively new phenomenon. My colleagues told me that still just a decade ago, a program like Intercultural education was almost unthinkable; that people with poor, mixed-race backgrounds were much unlikelier than today to choose a subject such as sociology or other humanities as their career path. So, what has changed?

This phenomenon links to larger sociopolitical circumstances in which public discourses spreading the gospel of entrepreneurship (and entrepreneurialism in general) create imaginaries

of freedom (Cabaña 2017; Rose 1999). Freedom to choose contains the dictum of liberty: *I can be what I want to be*. The neoliberal imaginaries and vocabularies related to entrepreneurialism market the idea that one can be an “entrepreneur of oneself”<sup>98</sup> (cf. Freeman 2014, Natanson 2016) even as a university student – much in the same fashion as I argue in chapter three that occurs with the triathletes at Ironsport (cf. Dardot & Laval 2016).<sup>99</sup> No longer shackled by one’s background or other markers of *otherness*, one is encouraged to be flexible in one’s life decisions and opt for the choices that make one *feel* the best (as opposed to *earning* the best). At the same time, one becomes an agent in an on-going competition of self-fulfillment without, of course, forgetting the importance of economic progress. In that sense, entrepreneurialism or being an entrepreneur unfolds as the most prized product of a meritocratic ideology in its neoliberal version. In the context of this chapter –i.e. in the context of Jorge and Fátima and in the following, Matías– the idea that one can choose to be who one wants to be is incorporated in the metanarratives of freedom and flexibility that ten years of public discourse on entrepreneurialism contain. And just as vocabularies of entrepreneurialism have seeped into the everyday life in Santiago, so are gradually the socially shared conceptions of freedom to choose what one wants to be.

Against this backdrop, cultural capital turns into coveted currency to attain one’s objectives of self-fulfillment. For those whose access to cultural capital has been practically guaranteed since their birth, the search for self-fulfillment through education is hardly news. For most mixed-race Santiaguinos, however, it is a novelty –and as an option, admittedly still

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<sup>98</sup> Foucault famously coined this idea in relation to the neoliberal version of *homo oeconomicus* – by excellence the entrepreneur of oneself who is exclusively for herself the producer of earnings; even the capital in itself. In this context, however, I expand the meaning of the term to include in it a wider understanding of individual freedom.

<sup>99</sup> “Being an entrepreneur of the self” in this context has a meaning that extends beyond Foucauldian understandings. In such understanding, the entrepreneur of the self is a subject whose interests are driven by market success and maximizing profit from her actions.

relatively rare. Fátima explores this through her declared interest in better understanding her cultural environment and roots, and by extension, herself. In her words:

To be honest, I don't want to have a fixed job that pays me 7000 pesos a month. I rather take a job that pays me 2000 pesos less but gives me the freedom to do more with my time, I mean, be more flexible about my schedules...I can still pay my bills and I'm paying back some debts I have...I can then start investing in other things [laughs] like new jeans, because honestly these are the only ones I have.

...

My classmates, they're worried about jobs, they say "what are we going to do when we graduate," and I'm just not so worried about it. I'm learning new things, I'm learning Quichua, and I don't even think about it in terms of work, just as something I know will teach me, you know, make me understand more...my culture, Santiago's culture. I'm learning so many new things, things about history, I had no idea about the history of indigenous people here, all the killings. And it still happens! I mean, can you believe it still happens, we're in 2000, not in the 1800s...It's strange but I'm also realizing, I'm lucky. I know I will be fine in the end, I don't know why, but I know I'll be fine [laughs], at least my God will help me!

Fátima does not mind financing her life as a student through domestic work at other people's houses. At the same time, she does yearn for material things her current salary prohibits her from having. Just as with some of the cooperative members I discuss in chapter four, for Fátima, being a cleaner is simply a means to an end. First and foremost, she is a student, and being a cleaner is just a transitory phase in her life. Her idea of socioeconomic status is not tied to prestige through economic growth or having a lucrative job. Instead, she aims to establish her place and status in the society through asserting her capacity to do what she truly wants to do, and through exploring her sociocultural environment by way of educating herself.

The quest for cultural capital in the case of Jorge and Fátima correlates with a quest for legitimacy through exploring their own sense of self and place in the world. Although they have chosen slightly different channels for this exploration, their underpinning concern is to include themselves in the society in a way that recognizes them for who and how they are. Rather than



negating the social categories that mark them as racially different and socioeconomically marginalized, they draw from those categories and convert them into sites of self-discovery. Being a university student implies having access to forms of cultural capital they would otherwise be barred from. That serves as an asset for both Jorge and Fátima as they carve out their places within the Santiagueña society. Theirs is not a story of intergenerational reproduction of cultural capital but just like with most of my informants at UNSE, a story of accessing and exploring its significance for the first time. It guarantees them a membership in a group of people who do not distinguish themselves from others with money or physical prowess, but with degrees and titles and the symbolic, legitimizing value these carry. In the next section, I discuss a different aspect of cultural capital acquisition; one that is markedly different from what I have so far analyzed. Instead of exploring who one is through university education in a specific field, Matías is in the university first and foremost to explore his possibilities for economic growth. He is there to show others he is not a *negro de mierda* and if anything, that he is better than those whom he thinks deem him as such. Matías, too, is in search for societal legitimacy. However, for him that legitimacy is not an end in itself but a path toward and part of economic capital.

### **Capitalizing on education: the case of Matías**

One of my most enthusiastic informants at UNSE was Matías, 30, a third-year student of accountancy whom I mention earlier in this chapter. Matías was keen on talking about his life and repeatedly recording his biography with me. He also actively messaged me to let me know how he had done in some exam in the university or about some workshop related to his aspirations in the construction business he had enrolled in. In terms of his entrepreneurial outlook to life, Matías resembled my informant Mario Diaz from Ironsport. There was, however, one decisive difference between the two. Mario considered himself a social entrepreneur with the

goal to transform the society and empower young people to improve their socioeconomic status in life. Matías's goal, in turn, was simply and solely to make money. "I want to make money, loads of money and after that, more money," Matías says and laughs. "I don't care what others think or say about me, I take every opportunity to make money and if I must work like a *negro* to get there, then I'll work like a *negro*. In two years, I will graduate as an accountant and after that, nothing can stop me."

Matías started his university career relatively late, at the age of 27. He is the first one in his family to go to a university and, to the extent he knows, also the first to have finished secondary school. Based on Matías's narratives, it seems fortuitous he went to high school to begin with and outright miraculous that he finished – by the time he was 14, he was already a drug-consuming delinquent with little hope to craft himself a different kind of life. At the age of 16, he dropped out of high school. At the age of 26, he went back to high school and that is when his life began to change.

In 2011, I meet a friend who was in prison for five years, in the prison because he killed his wife. So he gets out and we go buy drugs and he asks me questions of where I'm selling, who I'm buying from... and he tells me I'm an idiot, that I have no idea what it's like in the prison and that if I think what I'm doing is cool then I'm an idiot (*un salame, un pelotudo!*)... and I'm like, well, you're buying drugs with me, right?... Remember I told you about my friend Fernando in Córdoba? I'd just come back from there, you know, I was thinking about my life a little differently. And then this friend starts telling me that I'm an idiot if I think with dealing [drugs] I can ever be anything other than a *pelotudo*; he tells me, "if you want to become something other than a *pelotudo*, you have to study, go to a university, because those who study, they can graduate, they get better jobs, better money than us who must fuss over two pesos and steal," that's what he tells me. And he tells me, "if you go to the university and you make them [other students] see that they aren't smarter than you are and you make them see how smart you are, they will believe you. Because you will be way smarter than they [other students] who are all mommy's boys, who've never suffered hunger, cold, tiredness, and withdrawal symptoms." And he says, "if they [other students] suffer all that, they will kill themselves. You've suffered all that and you haven't killed yourself, so why the fuck aren't you in school?" "*Bueno*," I say, you know, this is what I will do, I will gradually quit drugs, I'll lock myself in my room and

quit completely, and I do it. I start watching the TV and Discovery channel, all kinds of documentaries and I see places I want to visit and things I want to do...and I go back to high school in 2012, finish in 2013, and 2014 I start at UNSE.

Matías wanted to study either business administration or accountancy. He did not know anybody who had studied business administration. But he had a friend who studied accountancy and had found a job at a bank. According to Matías his friend had a monthly income of 50,000 pesos – around 2300 USD at the time. The reference helped Matías make up his mind and enroll in the accountancy program. He quickly also realized that he was good with numbers and that understanding accountancy would help him with his own business. Thus, Matías did not start studying accountancy because he wanted to become an accountant. Instead, he wanted to study *something* that would earn him social esteem and respect, and thereby open doors for business opportunities and ceaseless money-making.

Every time I meet Matías, he wears smart-looking jeans and a collared shirt. He tells me it is important for him to feel that he is looking good because looking good provides him credibility among his peers. “People look at me and you know, if I don’t look good, they see a *negro*, like, “what is this *negro* doing here?”. I mean, I also like to look good, I like nice clothes, but I don’t spend on clothes so much, not until I make more money.” The search and aspiration for social credibility keeps on coming up in Matías’s narratives. He wants to “show others that [he] is not some *negro de mierda*,” “shut people’s mouths if they doubt [him],” and “show [he’s] smarter than they.” “You know what’s the best thing that can happen to me? The best thing that can happen to me is that they throw me on the ground and step on me and tell me I’m a *negro de mierda* because that’ll make me get up and get stronger, and I’ll show them how strong I am,” he says. Matías’s blustery remarks evoke imageries of psychical strength and prowess; even

violence. Moreover, they reveal how utterly conscious he is of his socioeconomic and also racial position vis-à-vis his peers. While Matías endeavors to mask his difference in the university through abiding by, for example, appearance-related standards, he foregrounds his difference as he tells me –and to himself– the story of his success. The principal narrative is one of overcoming poverty, a condition Matías unabashedly correlates with race (and ethnicity). Overcoming poverty implies not being a *negro* or an *indio*. (Matías claims to dislike *indios*, such as his grandparents, because of their ignorance and disdain towards education – his grandparents did not let his mother study beyond the first years of elementary school.) But in Matías’s view, one can be rich and still be a *negro*. He wants to be able to show that *despite* being a *negro*, he can do what he wants to do, and the best place to show that is the least likely for “people like [him]” – the university. Thus, Matías’s understandings of strength relate to his performance in the university and the (eventual) economic benefits that his academic endeavors will allow him to reap.

When I entered the faculty, I didn’t understand anything about anything, so I enter and I do like a market study to see how things work there, to see who is who and how people act and dress and what kinds of study groups people form, you know all that, you know, to see how I can work there the best possible way. So I meet this professor, his name is Castillo, and I know I’ll be taking his class that year...and I say, “*profe*, you are the professor for the admin class?” I tell my name and say, “I’m on your class, I’d like to volunteer as a note-taker...” and then I tell him about my story and how I got into the university, and he becomes interested in me. You know, that’s from the streets, on the streets you learn how to buy people and I have that skill [laughs]! So the *profe* takes me as his note-taker, he teaches me everything, tells me what and how I have to study, how to talk [correct Spanish], how to express myself, what to consume [eat, drink] in the university... and I have my job in the bakery so I bring him pastries and other things, you know...good manners.

I start doing small painting and plastering jobs for some professors, *Profe* Castillo first got me into it and then other *profes* hired me as well, you know, small work in their houses. And they just gave me the keys and I got to see their houses, these people live in mansions! I never charge them too much, always give a good budget and of course they like that. They see how hard I work in their houses and also how hard I work in the university and that’s how I start learning

the politics there, you know, who is who and all that, and I form my own study group, there's now 80 of us in our Whatsapp group and I'm the admin [shows me the Whatsapp group so that I believe him]. I get exam questions from the *profes* and then help others study for their exams, and of course I make some money as well [by selling the exam questions]... but I don't charge the poorer students, they're like me. I mean, I'm not some fucking communist or anything, but I want to help people who are like I used to be. But I charge the *chetos* [slang for a wealthy snob], and since I have exam questions, now even the *chetos* like me [laughs], they *want* me in their group!

Despite his dubious methods to achieve educational and social success in the faculty, Matías also studies hard. “When I’m not working, I study and study and study. Already on my second year, I passed a class that nobody thought I could pass as a second-years student, but I passed and shut people’s mouths, all those who doubted me.” “Did you get the questions for the exam beforehand?”, I ask. “No, I didn’t even know the professor!”, he says and laughs. Matías fluently begins to employ the term ‘cultural capital’ after I introduce it in one of our conversations, equating it with what he learns in the university and through the books he reads, and by observing people’s behavior. His understanding of cultural capital also comprises the knowledge bank he has built in the streets. As he himself acknowledges, this makes him capable of moving from one sociocultural domain to another with remarkable ease. Moreover, it enables him to manipulate his immediate social surroundings and make use of the small modifications for his own benefit –whether academic or economic. In his own words, he is entrepreneurial.

Matías’s mother, María, tells me that Matías had always been intractable, and after his adolescence, impossible. She is not sure what it is that made Matías change, but she says the change was palpable. When Matías went back to high school and then graduated, María felt the proudest she had ever felt. Matías was the first one in her family to receive anything but a broken elementary school education. When she found out Matías had enrolled in the university, she could not believe it: “I said, *dios mío*, the Virgen Mary had heard me, I thanked Jesus...I finally

felt whole [*plena*], after all that suffering...” María recognizes that she never thought her children could go to a university. The option simply did not fit within the scope of any conceivable possibilities. María’s own parents had discouraged her to study at all and sent her instead to work in Buenos Aires when she was 13. At 17, she returned to her village in Santiago’s interior and a few years later moved to the city. She became a domestic employee for a family with whom she still works, 38 years later. Three years ago, her employer organized for her to obtain her work document. It was the first time she had ever received social security benefits. But it did not make her salary any better. Matías’s father, a career alcoholic, has always been absent from the family scene, leaving the family’s economic struggles for María to manage.

I don’t know how Mati has done it all, because we’ve always been poor. But he got *progresar* [the federal student aid] and that’s made a huge difference. I mean it’s not much, but he has enough to pay for his photocopies and bus fare and all that. He doesn’t really tell me anything about his economic situation, he’s private and independent, but I know with the jobs he does, you know, with all that painting and plastering, and working at the bakery, he makes some money and we pay our expenses...and I tell him that he should not let his work stop his studies, his studies must be his priority, and he tells me to mind my own business and worry less [laughs]. I can’t even imagine how I’ll feel when Mati graduates, imagine, an accountant in the *Familia Beltrán*, nobody in our family could believe it! The important thing is that he can get a good job, like some of his friends he’s told me about...you’re nothing in this world if you don’t have a good job, that’s just how it is. There’s work for everybody if people want to work, I don’t care what the politics [sic] says. But a good job, a good job you only get with studies.

Both Matías and his mother view education as a way to achieve the goal of economic upward mobility rather than as a goal in itself. When Matías discusses his future plans and dreams, he never envisions himself working as an accountant, neither in the private nor the public sector. He wants to expand his dry-wall and construction business and hire people to work with him; he plans to invest in better machines “because [he] intend[s] to become Santiago’s number one dry-wall maker, and then the number one in the entire North-West.” Matías is certain that before he

graduates, he will be “an important businessman.” That, however, will not deter him from finishing his studies. For him, university education in itself and the title to which it leads, is an asset “among experts and investors” in his field of interests – the business world. Cultural capital in Matias’s case becomes a legitimizing asset which confers on him social credibility that he thinks he otherwise would not have. In a way, cultural capital injects substance to the economic wealth he aspires to accrue – without that substance, the economic capital alone makes him nothing but “*un negro rico*” – a rich *negro*.

## **Conclusion**

Pancho is preparing the mate one morning when I arrive at the Laboratorio. I start telling him about a meeting I have just had with Estefi, 22, a student in business administration at UNSE. She has told me how, when she was 14 or 15, first years of high school, she thought she would start working right after graduating. Her mother is a cleaner at a hospital in Santiago. Estefi tells me her mother has fought her whole life to make sure her children, Estefi and her sister, have food to eat and clothes that look decent. “I guess I could’ve ended up as a cleaner as well. But I didn’t. They say that domestic employee’s daughters become domestic employees. But I don’t think it’s like that anymore, it doesn’t have to be.” I read this to Pancho from my notes and ask what he thinks about it – how and when have these social axioms began to collapse? Pancho reflects on this and then says that in his view, they are not collapsing. But they are beginning to crumble. He says in Santiago everything happens twice as slow as elsewhere in the country. Given that historically, the province’s role in the Argentine economy has been to ensure that people in Buenos Aires have clean homes, it is not difficult to understand why the change towards something else is slow. We then start discussing how information technology

undoubtedly makes it easier for people today to find information about educational opportunities, and financial aid and loans. The provincial and national economic upturn until 2015 has also helped a whole generation to reconfigure their horizons of possibilities, and higher education has become included in them. The realities we discuss still do not correlate with the national imageries of a country with presumably one of the best higher education systems in the continent. But universities along with other tertiary education institutions in Santiago are growing more inclusive, challenging the assumptions that in Santiago, higher education is for the wealthy (and the white) only.

How the landscape of higher education in Santiago has developed since the early 2000 challenges some of the widely shared narratives about higher education in Argentina in general. The university reform in 1918 began a process of ‘democratizing’ higher education in the country. Gradually, and as more universities were founded throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Argentina indeed grew to be among the best educated nations in the continent. However, as I have discussed in this chapter, the idea of *who* the educated Argentines were (and should be) was blind to the ethno-racial gamut of Argentines, especially in the north. In the hegemonic ideas of Argentine-ness, access to higher education was a democratic right of all citizens and pivotal in turning Argentina into a country of well-educated middle classes. But those hegemonic ideas overlooked the existence of the periphery where higher education was neither democratic nor a people’s right, but a privilege of a handful of the ruling elites. The societal and educational changes in today’s Santiago call such ideas into question and draw attention instead on the processes by which cultural capital can be redistributed across class and race lines.

The gradual (and slow) redistribution of cultural capital in Santiago defies the determinist character of the social reproduction paradigm (cf. Tzanakis 2011). It would be naïve to suggest



that because more mixed-race students have begun to enter in higher education institutions in Santiago, those institutions no longer produce and perpetuate class differences. Just like elsewhere in the world, students with a wealth of familial cultural capital and economic means that have allowed them to study at a private school, are much better prepared for university than those who have neither. Added to that the racial component that positions students in different social categories and sets them for an often negatively differential treatment in educational institutions, it seems fair to say that universities are still far from being all people's places, or even all people's possibilities. Yet histories across geographic and cultural frontiers show that education plays a crucial role in processes of social stratification. In this chapter I have discussed the specific mechanisms that underpin the human experience of those processes on the basis of education.

Jorge's, Fátima's and Matías's stories describe how access to cultural capital orients their conceptions of themselves and understandings of the sociocultural world they inhabit. In their narratives about their family histories, the word 'university' hardly comes up and education in general is mostly mentioned as a privilege their parents were deprived of. However, Jorge's, Fátima's and Matías's stories about themselves, and the everyday conversations I had with them, speak of a different reality. None of them takes university education for granted. But they all view it as a right they are entitled to have and, moreover, as a way to build a social status for themselves that rescues them from the society's cultural and economic margins. In their case, cultural capital becomes status currency that carries a special, legitimizing force. That force is what frames the experience of becoming somebody in the society, whether an active participant in the civil society or a budding businessman. In other words, accruing cultural capital makes the

transition from the society's racial(ized) and socioeconomic margins to the central arenas of productivity meaningful and, above all, legitimate.

## Conclusion

### Part I: The ‘what?’

The relevance of entrepreneurialism to socioeconomic mobility is hardly news. It sits in the heart of the story of ‘modern Argentina;’ the modern Argentina whose face is white and whose origins are on the other side of the Atlantic. As the former president Mauricio Macri declared in the Business and Investment Forum in 2016, Argentina is an entrepreneurial country built by immigrants. And the immigrants, who came from the other side of the Ocean, were “the true entrepreneurs” for they braved the unknown and crossed the Ocean equipped with courage and optimism (Macri 2016). The statement, as myopic as it is erroneous in its understanding of how Argentina was built and by whom, does point to the causal relationship between being entrepreneurial and socioeconomically mobile. That relationship grounds two major tenets in the Argentine national identity: first, that Argentina is a middle-class country and second, that its middle-class citizens are white. In more caricaturized terms, the builders of modern Argentina were white Europeans who were entrepreneurial and able to generate intergenerational socioeconomic mobility to the point that they all became middle-class. While there are countless ways to contest this foundation narrative, the power it has held (and holds) in shaping the national identity is immense. Being middle-class and white, especially over the course of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, became synonymous for being a good, hard-working citizen. That way, the imaginaries of middle-classness left the racial(ized) *other* outside the matrix of decency, respectability, and legitimacy. Today, being entrepreneurial stands in many ways as an expression of middle-classness. Just as the middle class and middle-class identity rest on the idea of social mobility, entrepreneurialism embodies aspirations for success, mobility, and higher

socioeconomic achievement. But unlike being middle-class, being entrepreneurial is less encumbered and marked by parameters of race.

This dissertation demonstrates that while entrepreneurialism is intimately linked to the middle class, it has become a powerful status for criollos precisely because it does not automatically mean being middle-class. Being an entrepreneur/ial, I argue, allows criollos to aspire for social mobility without directly identifying with the middle class. It makes it possible to aspire for middle-class lifestyle or middle-class models of consumption without necessarily facing the racialized frontier that regulates middle-class membership, as it is traditionally understood in Argentina. Being entrepreneurial, whether in terms of one's attitude or having a business, is laced with symbolic value; value that justifies the upwardly aspirations among criollo entrepreneurs. This leads to the other central argument in this dissertation.

Entrepreneurialism frames a social status category that is inherently mobile. This mobility reflects both in the social understandings of what kind of a person an entrepreneur is and in the more theoretical formulation of what entrepreneurialism as a concept means. First, the figure of an entrepreneur is a person who is dynamic and flexible and keeps her ideas and practices in constant motion. Second, entrepreneurialism is a migrant concept that can find its home as much in the lower socioeconomic stratum as among the "top 1%." This sense of mobility that entrepreneurialism at once embodies and is built upon is what also makes it accessible for the racially marginalized. In other words, entrepreneurialism marks a social category that inspires aspirations for socioeconomic success, cultivates understandings of progress, and both sustains and is sustained by desire for social mobility. Given its migratory capacity to find its place in different socioeconomic environments, entrepreneurialism as a way of being welcomes criollos, i.e. the racial *other*, who are otherwise seen as the stagnant poor.

Having a social status that rests on an entrepreneurial identity does not erase racial hierarchies in Santiago, Argentina, or elsewhere. But it offers criollos novel opportunities to challenge them. By using the word ‘challenge’ I do not intend to evoke images of defiance and belligerence. Instead, I visualize this ‘challenging’ as multiple steps one takes to circumvent an obstacle that otherwise impedes one from progressing. Those steps are also representative of capital accumulation, whether physical and social, economic, or cultural. One could envision this sequence of steps as the following: having an entrepreneurial character shows in one’s choices and practices which, as in Upianita, Ironsport, the cooperative, or even in the university translate into the acquisition of different forms of capital. Accumulating capital helps one to gain social status, which, in turn, makes aspirations for socioeconomic mobility increasingly viable. Becoming socially mobile provides access to e.g. lifestyles, consumption environments, and educational opportunities that are representative of what is socially considered middle-classness and historically beyond criollos’ reach. As the ‘entrepreneurial criollos’ work their way towards access to these domains, they also gain legitimacy as citizens – much like the immigrants who started to build the Argentine middle classes (or climb to them) three, four generations ago. I would like to reiterate that becoming an ‘entrepreneurial, legitimate citizen’ does not decolorize Argentine class system or unburden socioeconomically aspirational criollos from the weight of whiteness/non-whiteness. Neither do I suggest that being an entrepreneur/ial automatically leads to the same privileges as enjoyed by those who socioeconomically belong to and identify with the middle class. But it does make it possible for criollos to access socioeconomic domains that hitherto they have been largely barred from on the basis of their geographic origins, family histories, and skin color.

## Part II: The ‘so what?’

“So, how will it end?” Alberto, alias Locutor, asked me as we were sitting in a café a couple of weeks before I would go back to the United States. “What will end?” I asked.

- The book you’re writing.
- Locu, I’m not writing a book, it’s a thesis.
- But it will have many pages, like books [says with a tongue-in-cheek face].
- Well I don’t know about that, hopefully not too many.
- But how will it end?
- Well, it’ll end with a conclusion. But I’m not yet sure what the conclusion will say. Maybe I’ll try to summarize or explain what my thesis is about, you usually summarize things in conclusions. Or maybe I’ll write something about you! I guess I’ll try to explain why it’s important what I’ve studied here, that’s also something you usually do with conclusions. I’ll tell you once it’s done.

I wrote down that part of our conversation right after I got home that evening for it seemed it would be suitable for the ending of any thesis. The conversation was the last I had with Locutor before I left the field and for the most part, we talked about Europe. Locutor, one the *becarios* at Ironsport whom I write about in chapter three, told me he would soon buy a roundtrip ticket to Spain. He had planned a trip of three months with an initial budget of 500 euros. The plan was to find work and couch surf. I warned him that while couch surfing would not be difficult, finding work might be whole different story. He laughed at my words of caution with the arrogance proper of a 22 years old young and able man about to conquer the Old Continent.<sup>100</sup> Locutor was

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<sup>100</sup> As I mention in chapter three, Locutor eventually did travel to Europe and stayed for three months. Part of that time he worked as a general handyman (for free) for a cycling team in Barcelona. He also trained with them. Mario, the owner of Ironsport, knew the team’s coach and had recommended Locutor to him. When I went back to Santiago in November 2018, Locutor shared his travel stories with me. They were stories of not taking a shower for a week, of sleeping in rough in Verona for a few nights, of getting a toe infection that impeded him from distributing fliers he had been hired to do by a night club; of selling his semen to a semen bank in Barcelona that paid enough for him to eat for a week. He beamed with excitement and between each colorful anecdote, he repeated what a wonderful experience it had been. Later during that same visit, I went to an *asado* with some of the Ironsport team members. Locutor was there as well. I noticed something curious: the conversation topics were hardly different than before – training, racing, and travel stories–, but Locutor was no longer the one asking detailed questions about flights, cities, trains and buses in Europe. Instead, he would contribute to the narrative exchanges. We all laughed as we joked about Locutor’s semen bank visits and leaving babies all over the continent. But once Locutor had left the *asado* and a few of us stayed talking, there was a consensus that Locutor was incredibly resourceful and resilient. “He’s an entrepreneur who’ll go far,” Benjamin, a hedge fund owner, concluded.

ready for the adventure: he winked and said he had received good preparation at Ironsport from the teammates who have travelled to Europe on multiple occasions.

When I wrote down parts of our conversation that evening, I did not know whether I would end up writing about Locutor in the conclusion. But I did know I should explain why the research for this dissertation matters. So, why does it matter that Locutor asks his wealthy triathlon teammates about their travels to Europe while devising ways to save every peso he can to experience the glamour of crossing the Atlantic; or that Fátima studies a degree in intercultural pedagogy in the university to better understand “her criollo roots” and “become somebody”; or that Sofia in the cooperative “works like a *negra*” to save more capital for a vegetable kiosk she wants to expand? The common denominator between Locutor, Fátima and Sofia, and among all the informants whose life-histories and everyday practices constitute the core of this dissertation, is their aspiration to gain social status and, on the basis of that status, climb on the socioeconomic ladder. It is not only their aspirations that matter but also –especially– how they express their aspirations through embracing the ethos of entrepreneurialism. What is at stake is status and legitimacy. Historically, the Argentine and Santiagueña society has impeded criollos’ access to both status and legitimacy by leaving them as an inconvenience or an unimportant inhabitant in the society’s socioeconomic fringes. The aim of my research –and the reason why it matters– is to show how ‘being entrepreneurial’ enables the racial(ized) *other* to explore avenues towards status, legitimacy and thus, to aim at and also experience social mobility. Those avenues, marked and signposted by aspiration, run parallel with paths to empowerment and agency. And, as this dissertation shows, they can bypass some of the society’s most restricting territories where social mobility is traditionally conditioned by race.

In Argentina, the possibility for criollos to experience socioeconomic mobility implicitly indicates wider societal transformations. These transformations do not necessarily signify less racism and reactionism or dismantling of the patriarchal structures that still underpin the everyday life in Santiago. They speak of global processes where neoliberalism has expanded from an economic doctrine to being today's defining ideology and the contemporary way of the world. One of neoliberalism's incarnations is the modern entrepreneur. Shared imaginaries of what it means to be entrepreneurial have gradually turned into a social dogma of sorts; a moral compass to help navigate, categorize and organize the surrounding social world. For the marginalized *other*, entrepreneurialism is not only a navigational tool but also a tool to challenge the hierarchies of class and race. These hierarchies have served –and still serve– as the main differentiating axes in the society, together with gender. I do not argue against this or suggest that entrepreneurialism as a way of being would make those axes of difference disappear. What this dissertation argues is that how the concept of *emprededuría* –entrepreneurialism– is mobilized in Argentina today offers an alternative principle to structure and re-hierarchize the society. Further, that structuring does not occur solely on the basis of class, race or gender but, in a more dynamic fashion, on the basis of whether one is an innovative, creative and risk-taking citizen, or not; whether one is an entrepreneurial and hence legitimate citizen, or not.

To study social mobility among criollos in relation to entrepreneurialism makes it possible to examine how people develop and 'wear' different identities. By this I mean principally both racial and class identities. But above all, I mean how self-identifying as an entrepreneur mediates between the two and provides them different kinds of meanings. How one makes meaning out of her own entrepreneurial way of being, makes it possible to start deciphering how the individual constructs her sense of self as a person of certain race/ethnicity



or of certain class. Take the case of Julia and Gustavo, whom I discuss in the first chapter. Their business of painted wooden artifacts, such as jewelry boxes, mirror cases, stools, etc., has made an enormous economic difference in their lives. How Julia talks about her childhood in one of Santiago's poorest neighborhoods, her parents' origins in the province's interior, and her ideas of her family's current class position makes constant reference to her and her husband's business and their entrepreneurial attitude to life writ large. She explains her life experiences through her sense of self as an entrepreneur, as if empowered by it to glean new kind of meaning of her roots and previous socioeconomic position.

Similar processes occur in the cooperative, which I discuss in chapter four. All the women whom I asked –and who worked in extraofficial jobs e.g. as domestic employees (aside from the cooperative)–, defined themselves first and foremost as entrepreneurs or cooperative workers (*cooperativistas*).<sup>101</sup> If they discussed their lives as domestic employees, they would usually say it in the past tense – “I *used to be* a domestic employee.” What could theoretically be the next phrase is: “now I *am* an entrepreneur/cooperativist although I still have to *work* as an employee.” Domestic employees in Santiago (and Argentina) are usually criollos.<sup>102</sup> The image that the idea of a domestic employee evokes is an image of a woman with dark skin and black hair, and an accent that betrays her origins somewhere in the country's hinterlands. Thus, *being* a domestic employee is charged with meaning that goes beyond one's labor situation or gender, indicating also one's skin color or racial features. *Being* an entrepreneur while/despite *working* as a domestic employee enables one to circumvent the racial and gendered associations with a job

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<sup>101</sup> In Spanish at least, the word *cooperativista* has a dynamic echo to it; a tacit meaning of being part of something enterprising.

<sup>102</sup> Santiago has the fame of being the principal exporter of domestic labor force to Buenos Aires. Still, when my informants would tell me about their female family members who have moved to Buenos Aires, there would be tacit understanding that they are likely to work there as domestic employees, cleaners, or nannies.

that also signifies a position on the bottom ranks of class hierarchies. In other words, considering oneself an entrepreneur is a way to filter other self-identifications. Of course, the same process can happen in reverse order, and it would naïve to suggest that the different identity hats we wear come in a fixed, prearranged order. But what highlights the entrepreneurial identity is its aforementioned role as the mediator between the other two, racial and class.

These identity processes matter for they speak of larger societal undercurrents of shifting conceptions of social hierarchies and shared value systems. In terms of how entrepreneurialism has become harnessed as an empowering way of being, those processes reflect the role that public discourse plays in shaping people's capacity to articulate their sense of self. I mean this in a very literal sense. The Argentine political-economic message for the past decade –with some variation depending on the government in power– has consistently repeated the importance of entrepreneurialism as an engine for the national economy. The print and online media, televised media, social media, and even billboard publicity campaigns are saturated with implicit and explicit content that champions and encourages entrepreneurship and gives advice on how to be entrepreneurial. The word entrepreneurialism, which has all but colonized this conclusion, too, and its different grammatical variations (*emprendeduría, emprender, emprendedor, emprendimiento*, etc.) have become commonplace vocabulary in the everyday uses of Argentine Spanish. This, in turn, indicates familiarity with that vocabulary across the socioeconomic spectrum. Consequentially, it has become accessible and popular as terminology that applies to, describes, and explains different individual and collective practices, mentalities, and attributes.

### **Part III: The ‘how?’**

I conducted my research in discrete ethnographic sites that served as laboratories for observing how differing social environments facilitate and/or condition aspirations for upward mobility. They are sites that in the crudest sense, are framed by sport, business, and education. Despite being markedly different in terms of the interactions and practices they harbor, the sites share the commonality of cultivating status and aspirations for social mobility. This makes it possible to analyze them and the life within them through the lens of physical and social, economic, and cultural capital. My dissertation dedicates chapters three, four, and five to each particular field site –the Ironsport triathlon club; the Cooperativa Integral, and the Universidad Nacional. In the first chapter, I discuss extensively also my initial field site, the Upianita tourist fair. Every chapter represents an angle of its own in terms of my approach to and analysis of those sites. The larger analytical framework concerns capital accumulation in different social fields and the agents’ struggles within them to achieve class mobility. In the ethnographic chapters, however, I concentrate specifically on one or two forms of capital and examine entrepreneurialism and status-building using those capitals as my analytical toolkit. Besides this, in the first chapter I use my fieldwork from Upianita and with individuals outside the primary sites to illustrate the deeper undercurrents of racial and class identity construction that resonate in the rest of the chapters.

In chapter one, I take both an ethnographic and historical approach to probing how race and class relations operate in Santiago and more generally, in Argentina. Neither Santiago nor Argentina are unique in terms of how histories of colonization, immigration and discrimination have shaped the nation’s social fabric and the hierarchies it conceals. But they offer an excellent window onto how those histories reflect in today’s social organization and, moreover, a

wonderful backdrop against which to contrast today's subtle societal changes. I discuss the historical imaginaries of the making of modern Argentina with its European workforce; i.e. the immigrants who came in the ships and built the Argentine nation. The period between the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, known as the 'Great Migration' has become seen as a foundation for intergenerational family narratives of socioeconomic mobility, becoming middle-class, and having European roots. Yet as chapter one demonstrates, those narratives constitute a myth that does not pass the test of everyday realities, especially not in Santiago and the Northern region in general. Instead, what the chapter shows is how in Santiago, not only are people's origin stories different from the hegemonic national narratives, but they are also gaining voice and legitimacy as alternative narratives. I argue that criollos, upon starting to experience social mobility, become increasingly vocal in discussing their humble, mixed-race family origins in relation to what they have become in terms of their socioeconomic position. In other words, criollo identities can grow in tandem with self-identifying as an entrepreneur or as a socially mobile citizen. But rather than explaining these self-identifications causally –e.g. "I self-identify as a middle-class Argentine *because of my European roots*"–, the narratives tend to be rooted in contrast: "I am a socially mobile, legitimate citizen *despite my family roots in the monte (the bush).*"

Chapter two focuses on this dissertation's theoretical underpinnings and the literature that has informed it. I lay out the analytical framework that follows Bourdieuan concepts of social space, habitus and capitals to delineate the less visible contours of this research. I also discuss literature on middle-classness from different perspectives, whether geographic and cultural or more specifically, ethno-racial. References to middle-classness are largely absent from the ways my informants discuss their social positions. Nevertheless, the idea of the middle class is ubiquitous in the social imaginaries of Argentina's class structure and hence of pivotal

importance to my research. Finally, I unpack the concept of entrepreneurialism which, as I have by now explained in multiple occasions, works like the lifeline that runs through this dissertation and binds together the chapters it consists of.

Chapter three discusses the Ironsport triathlon club, examining a group of people that engages in high-intensity training and racing in a sport known as extremely demanding and also money-consuming. The group also fosters a curious coexistence between two social worlds that could hardly be any more different. On one side, there are the athletes who pay a monthly membership to be part of the team, who are generally well-educated, self-identify as middle-class, live in affluent, centric neighborhoods and, moreover, are white. On the other side, there are the *becarios* – young talented athletes whom the team’s head coach and Ironsport’s owner, a former elite triathlete himself, coaches without charge, and who in exchange must be enrolled in a higher education institution.

The *becarios* come from deprived backgrounds, generally live in the city’s poor outskirts, and are criollos. In the club, the border separating the two sides becomes porous and flexible; the two social worlds overlap as in a Venn diagram, constituting a “sporting field.” I describe and analyze the sporting field as an interactive and transactional space where its agents, the paying members and *becarios* alike, strive for a constant accrual of physical capital, i.e. strenuous training to improve the body’s physical performance capacity. What the members *do* with this capital, however, is slightly different. It serves as status currency (athletic prowess being generally admired across different cultural contexts) to all team members. But while the middle-class athletes convert that currency mostly into strengthening their position in the social spaces they occupy, the *becarios* use that currency to strive for changing their class position through elevating their social status. The social capital the *becarios* acquire through their interactions

with the paying members becomes a potentiating platform to aspire for a lifestyle that they indirectly witness in the sporting field. The sporting field, I suggest, enables all team members to become entrepreneurial athletes and especially the *becarios*, ‘athletic entrepreneurs.’ The athletes turn their bodies into an enterprise of its own; a site of constant labor and investment with the expectation that it yields the desired results. At the same time, the *becarios* strive towards social success as “physical entrepreneurs” (Wacquant 1995) who harness their athletic success (together with the social capital they acquire in the sporting field) as prime material for status-building.

The fourth chapter concerns the workings of a women-led cooperative, the *Cooperativa Integral de Santiago del Estero*. The cooperative produces artisanal woodwork such as home decorations and other small household items. In the context of this dissertation, the case of the cooperative is an example of a social space where its agents’ concrete goal is to produce and sell, i.e. gain economic remuneration in return for their investment of time and labor. Moreover, the site shows how cooperative work –collective efforts to obtain economic success– functions as a hotbed for generating entrepreneurial self-understandings. This environment, I argue, grows from an ongoing production of social capital that empowers the workers collectively as they begin to consider themselves entrepreneurs individually.

What is particularly fascinating about the cooperative is its work in the field of carpentry, a trade traditionally associated with men and masculinity. This accentuates the cooperative’s character as a gendered space where the workers’ life as women with families, their possible informal work as domestic employees, and the masculine line of work that furthers their entrepreneurial identities intersect. I unravel this intersection through the women’s interactions in

their workshop, narratives about their own lives, and their activities outside the confines of the cooperative.

In the workshop and outside in situations that relate to the cooperative, (i.e. professionalization courses), the women self-identify as entrepreneurs. At the same time, it is not unusual that they take on informal jobs to supplement the meager income the cooperative provides. Working as a domestic employee or a nanny is an easy option because such jobs form part of a labor industry governed by informality, flexibility and, especially for uneducated criollos, accessibility. In the chapter I discuss the cooperative members' labor identities and how work in the cooperative affords them the possibility to move from *being* a domestic employee to *being* an entrepreneur who, circumstantially, may have to *work* as a domestic employee. The empowering perception of oneself as an entrepreneur also harks back to the question of public discourse and how it affects the vocabularies people employ to talk about themselves and the surrounding world. The chapter discusses this through ethnographic illustrations of sites where that discourse exposes its situated power, such as in the *Plataforma Emprender* workshop: “*Hola*, my name is Juan, and I’m an accountancy student and also an entrepreneur;” “*Hola qué tal*, I’m Elsa and like everybody else here [laughs], I’m an entrepreneur.” In that sense, the fourth chapter is not only an examination of the effect that self-identifying as an entrepreneur has on the women’s subjectivities, but also of how those subjectivities are constituted and structured.

The last chapter, which tells the story of three criollo students in Santiago’s National University (UNSE), explores how the students capitalize on their university education. Accruing cultural capital is one of the most important ways to build social status and historically sits in the heart of the Argentine middle-class success stories. But as the chapter shows, cultural capital can be particularly exclusive capital when understood in relation to higher education. Probing the

parameters of this exclusivity, the chapter asks –how *do* criollos access higher education and, moreover, what do they *do with* it? The cases of Matías, Fátima, and Jorge portray the mutability of cultural capital and the different purposes that it can be harnessed to serve. Where Fátima is engaged in a process of better understanding her criollo roots through studying a degree on intercultural pedagogy, Matías is fixated upon finishing his studies in accountancy to maximize his capacities as an entrepreneur. Jorge, in turn, has carved out a space for himself in the student politics whose core participants, like Jorge himself, are students of sociology and supporters of left-leaning ideologies. The chapter draws images of these students' life histories, present lives, and future aspirations that reflect the meanings attributed to higher education in widely shared social imaginaries.

Each of my ethnographic sites is a case study of aspirational social mobility, racial identity, and entrepreneurialism which I have approached through the lens of different capitals. Each of these cases studies also leave room for further research and cultivate questions that this dissertation does not address. The Ironsport triathlon team, for instance, would serve as an excellent site to study more the relationship between gender, sport and social status. I recognize that in my focus on the relationship between the criollo *becados* and the middle-class members of the team, I have left the question of gender largely unexplored. It would be fascinating to examine how gender mediates that relationship. Similarly interesting would be to focus more exclusively on the female members of the team and study how they negotiate their place in the masculine world of triathlon while also aiming to 'live up to' their role as middle-class wives (or divorcees), mothers, and educated professionals. As I am writing these lines, I am yet to decide what kinds of contours will define my next research project. Yet as I revisit the triathlon team in



the future (and continue to train with them), I plan to explore the gendered dimension of that site with greater analytical detail.

Most of my informants are socioeconomically vulnerable, despite having experienced some form of social mobility and at least increased their chances to improve their socioeconomic position. Argentina's current economic crisis, which broke loose at full force just as I left the field in December 2017, is particularly threatening to the population that my informants largely represent. In Argentina's current political and economic context, it is important to ask – to what extent can individuals and families like my informants hold onto their entrepreneurial practices, dispositions, and identities? How do socially shared meanings and imaginaries of entrepreneurialism transform as a consequence of an economic disaster, such as what Argentina is currently experiencing? Keeping these questions in mind while generating new ones, I expect this dissertation to serve me as a platform to continue investigating the intersections between entrepreneurial identities, status, and class mobility (whether up- or downwardly).

### **Part III: Final thoughts**

The *idea* of modern Argentina grew and took shape as a consequence of the influx of immigrants between the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> and the early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. The majority of these immigrants came from Europe, whom the state officials welcomed with open arms. After all, the state officials reasoned, Europeans represented higher level of culture, industrial development and 'civilization.' Furthermore, their skin was considerably fairer than that of the country's original inhabitants; with some luck, they also had blue eyes. Therefore, the logic continued, Europeans would be the most suitable people for populating Argentina's immense territory. The period of the Great Migration dichotomized the country and the nation. Understandings of

‘civilized people,’ perhaps most pronounced in urban areas such as Buenos Aires, stood in contrast to the ‘barbaric people’ in the country’s hinterlands. Decency and respectability were attributes associated with the hard-working immigrants and their descendants while in the interior, people were deemed lazy, uneducated and probably prone to delinquent behavior. The ‘modern Argentina’ in the making was brave and dynamic; the interior characterized by stagnation. The ‘modern Argentina’ was white and prosperous and its makers “came from the ships.” The lands outside the economic centers –especially lands in the north– were poor, their inhabitants dark, and nobody really knew or cared to know where they came from because ‘they had no history.’

This dichotomization serves as one historical backdrop (among, of course, many others) for research on today’s processes of social stratification in Argentina. Especially scholars of the middle classes recognize that the socioeconomic growth during the first three decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was elemental in the development of robust middle sectors. But the structural transformations implied an intensified *othering* of the country’s already marginalized criollos (and *indios* and *negros*), thereby creating a starker division between those with access and ‘entitlement’ to social mobility, and those condemned to never experience it. My research also makes use of this historical landscape composed by social, racial, and class dichotomies. Yet rather than employing those historical dichotomies as an explanative framework to analyze social maladies such as structural poverty, violence, or racism, this dissertation uses them as a backdrop against which I *contrast* current socioeconomic phenomena. In other words, I do not attempt to explain criollos’ social mobility as consequential of the historical dichotomies. Instead, my research argues that criollos’ social mobility is noteworthy and merits research because it occurs

*despite of* the historical dichotomies – much in a similar fashion as the question of Argentine and criollo origin narratives I discuss in chapter one.

In Argentina's interior provinces, anthropological and sociological research on mixed-race and indigenous people concerns mostly their struggles within the society's margins. This can mean studies on domestic employees' sense of agency in the province of Corrientes, (Canevaro 2016) Santiagueño migrant workers' role in agricultural industry (Tasso & Zurita 2013), or fights over landownership and territoriality among north-western indigenous populations (Bonetti 2016). These studies among others of similar kind have enormous importance for highlighting the battles and experiences of those, whose social position is linked to larger structural forces and whose voices the structural forces stifle. The problem, however, is that such research runs the risk of perpetuating imaginaries where marginalized populations' place is always in the society's economic and cultural fringes. In other words, although the research may focus on resistance and defiance –both of which are dynamic and mobile phenomena–, the analysis on the practices of resistance and defiance is situated inside those fringe areas. Thus, the question of how marginalized populations in Argentina's interior actually manage to leave those fringes remains largely unexplored. There are still vast territories to cover regarding research on structural transformations and social mobility among the racially *othered* in Argentina's interior –perhaps there are similar topical territories to explore in other Latin American countries, too. This dissertation represents a humble effort to venture into those territories and hopefully in the future, invite others with similar interests to join the expedition.

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