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Cumulative (dis)advantage and gender in working-class trajectories in Buenos Aires

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Abstract. This article deals with processes of cumulative advantage and disadvantage in trajectories of social mobility from a gender perspective. In order to investigate how working-class trajectories in the Buenos Aires Metropolitan Area are shaped by gender in terms of the accumulation of (dis)advantage, we carried out biographical interviews with individuals from different social backgrounds within the working class. It was found that families with more stable situations were able to marshal resources in a way that made spirals of cumulative advantage more likely. Within this group, some men were able to take full advantage, while more often faced obstacles.

Keywords: social class, gender, cumulative advantage, cumulative disadvantage, social mobility, trajectories

Introduction

In this article we present the results of a study on social mobility that employed a qualitative approach.[1] Social mobility, a field of study with a long tradition in sociology, is one of the few areas in which the quantitative approach continued to dominate over the decades: it has remained almost untouched by the pluralization of paradigms and methodologies within the field of sociology that started in the 1960s. But while it is clear that social mobility is a field that requires quantification, this method is necessary but not insufficient for identifying the processes and mechanisms involved (Bertaux & Thompson, 2007).

In the present article, we qualitatively explore a series of processes with a view to enhancing our understanding of social mobility in relation to two issues: gender differences/inequalities, and the spirals of cumulative advantage or disadvantage in a life course. After developing the conceptual and methodological elements of the research, we present findings for two working class fractions, categorized by way of a qualitative analysis: a precarious segment, and a "consolidated" segment characterized by stable and formal jobs.

Our starting point was Pierre Bourdieu's (2012) theory of social class and Daniel Bertaux's (2005) theoretical–methodological approach. In addition, we revisit the idea—present in a range of theoretical traditions—that class and gender are articulated, and are forms of inequality that are mutually specified. One working hypothesis of this study is that when biographies are analyzed, some of the circumstances and occurrences that are most relevant in explaining the trajectories are interlinked even feed into one another. Each position in the social space based on class and gender entails typical processes of cumulative advantage and disadvantage.

Conceptual elements

Class trajectories

According to the Royal Spanish Academy, a trajectory ("*trayectoria*") can be defined as "a line described in the plane or in space by a body in movement"[2] when referring to the physical world; or "the course that a person, a social group, or an institution, or their behavior, follows over time" (Real Academia Española, n.d.) when alluding to the social world.

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1 This was the focus of this author's research for his doctoral thesis entitled *Trayectorias de clase y género a través de relatos de vida: la intersección de desigualdades* (2019).

2 All translations from Spanish are by *Apuntes*.

This latter definition represents the broadest use of the term in the social sciences, encompassing different conceptual variants and specifications according to the theory in which it is framed. In the social sciences, the word is often used to describe the biographical paths of individuals or collective actors, as a way of foregrounding the role of time and the dynamic character of the units analyzed. It is common to speak of trajectories in different dimensions, such as occupational or educational trajectories (Muñiz Terra, 2011; Jacinto, 2010), with a view to delimiting the aspects of interest in a study. The articulation of different trajectories gives rise to a single life trajectory in which some spheres are considered more important than others, depending on the characteristics of the case, the theoretical approach, and other aspects that are to be explained or understood. The methodological techniques and resources employed, such as biographies, life stories, biograms, and life satisfaction charts, depend on the theoretical approach, and at the same time they have implications on how trajectories can be defined.

From the "life course" perspective, Glen Elder (1994) proposes that a trajectory refers to a pathway through a life or a career, and can be altered in terms of direction, degree, or proportion. A life course is understood as a sequence of events and transitions in an individual life associated with age and social structure. Events that occur gradually shape trajectories, some of which are transitions that involve breaks or changes of state or position; examples include entering the job market, getting married, having children, and so on. This is not to say that these occurrences are transitions in intrinsic terms; rather, they depend on the specific life course in question, even if some transitions are recurrent or typical.

The life course theory, developed during the 1970s in the United States, is founded on a series of principles for studying time in the lives of individuals: the principle of development over time, which involves linking historical/social time with individual development; the precept of time and place, which means situating the individual in the analysis, in the different spaciotemporal scales and contexts in which he or she is placed; the criteria of timing, which implies that an event or a transition does not always have the same impact on the trajectory, as it depends on the period in which it takes place; the foundation of interconnected lives, which signals that the trajectories of various subjects are interdependent and, thus, the transitions of some can influence the order and the implications of the events of others; and the principle of freedom, which gives meaning to this type of analysis, because it assumes that despite the multiple conditionings and limitations, individuals make decisions and construct their own life courses.

In European academia, trajectories have been studied from the biographical perspective by scholars such as Daniel Bertaux (1999), Franco Ferrarotti (1993), and Francis Godard and Robert Cabanes (1996). One characteristics that these studies have in common is the emphasis they place on what a biography reveals, reflects, and refracts of the social whole. Moreover, these authors all stress the preeminence of life stories and histories, which have a far loftier status than mere technical instruments and can be conceived as a theoretical/methodological approach (the biographical method), or even as a unique-case approach that allows discovery of what is hidden in everyday and subordinated practices.

For Bourdieu (2012), trajectories can be understood in two related ways: first, in terms of the dimensions, the global volume, and the relative composition of capital that are distributed among agents in the social space; and second, as a collective trajectory of a social class. The trajectory in social space refers to the evolution over time of the volume and structure of wealth, which takes into account the differences in the ways in which capital is acquired. Trajectories imply displacements that are paid with work, effort, and, fundamentally, with time. Social mobility can be vertical, when the volume of capital changes; and/or transversal, when the relative preponderance between capital changes by way of conversion. The same class condition, including the same relational position in a social structure at a given moment, can result, for different agents, in different social trajectories and different strategies, which offer a diachronic lens through which to observe social origin and itinerary. The displacements of individuals in the social space—which we might call individual trajectories—do not occur at random but in relation to a bundle of probable, collective trajectories. On occasion, some subjects might stray from a modal trajectory for their class of origin based on stakes and reconversions between the forms of capital possessed, but even deviations have a certain objective probability of occurring based on class position and trajectory.

Class trajectories are, in sum, "typical trajectories that whoever inherits a given capital *has to traverse*" (Cachón Rodríguez, 1989, p. 545), which result from "a process of determination of personal destinations produced from the class structure" and which, at once, "form a constitutive part of the class or fraction" (p. 546). Lorenzo Cachón Rodríguez's definitions draw on the perspectives of Bourdieu and Bertaux, and provide the point of view on trajectories that we adopt in this article.

Prior studies in Argentina related to **class trajectories** have generally adopted the classical perspective on social mobility and have incorporated, to a greater or lesser extent, the qualitative approach (among others, Pla

& Rodríguez de la Fuente, 2014; Dalle, 2016), although there have also been other works that deal specifically with class trajectories, in the sense of Bourdieu and Bertaux, by way of qualitative approaches (Jiménez, 2014).

Cumulative and spiraling advantage and disadvantage

In the biographical model of contemporary inequalities (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2003), some of the mechanisms of action are situated in the life course of individuals and families. In this regard, the notion of cumulative advantage and disadvantage throughout the lives of agents enables an understanding of an aspect of inequalities that may have assumed greater importance in contemporary times (Dewilde, 2003). The idea of cumulative advantage and disadvantage draws partly on Robert Merton's (1968) theory related to the Matthew effect in science, which posits that certain advantages in capabilities, positions, and resources that are initially relatively small can increase over time, thus widening the gap in relation to those individuals who are disadvantaged. This is a systemic tendency toward interindividual divergence that is more or less pronounced depending on the society and the era (Dannefer, 2003).

Bourdieu's social reproduction theory explained this type of phenomenon by stressing the differences in cultural capital transmitted during primary socialization, which forms the basis of subsequent inequalities. The cumulative advantage and disadvantage thesis contributes to an understanding of the specific ways in which these initial inequalities can expand over a life course. Moreover, this premise complements theoretical developments related to assignment of status and roles at institutions with a pyramid structure, where the senior positions are scarce and therefore only some individuals have a chance of occupying them. The same dynamic occurs at other levels, such as segments of the labor market or regions. Thus, given a set of individuals with similar attributes and merits, only some will ascend to the highest positions. Recompense in the form of income as well as other consequences stemming from positioning in dimensions such as health and education deepen inequalities, as they offer new promotion opportunities for some and near-insurmountable obstacles for others (Dannefer, 2003).

Inherited social disadvantages do not all have the same weight and do not all lead to a single destination. Minor Mora Salas and Orlandina de Oliveira (2014) employ the life stories of young people of poor Mexican origins to analyze different routes to overcoming or reproducing poverty, as well as those trajectories that lead to social exclusion. Among the paths that some of these youths took to surmount poverty, the authors highlight formal education and protected employment, which, as well as being

advantages in themselves, had other positive repercussions that allowed inherited disadvantages to be partially overcome. Conversely, with regard to routes towards reproduction, instability and lack of employment protection were considerable disadvantages. These, along with others such as conflictive family environments, early labor transition, a truncated educational trajectory, and limited employability, all accumulated and left the youths trapped in vulnerability. On paths that courted the risk of social exclusion, the accumulation of inherited disadvantages and events with catastrophic effects combined with socially transgressive behavior, causing some of the youths to remain stuck in a spiral of chronic impoverishment.

The accumulation of advantage and disadvantage implies that both are interlinked and interact with each other. They can, by turns, strengthen and feed into each other, sending the agents into vicious or virtuous circles. Some benefits are a condition of possibility of others, making them more probable; either they make it possible to utilize the yield of others (for example, social capital along with educational credentials) or they reduce risks and allow potential disadvantages to be easily counteracted. The same can occur with obstacles, whose effects can be isolated and fleeting, or much more profound and long-lasting if they combine with other difficulties at a time of great vulnerability in the life course. The temporalities of events and the different types of transitions in the course of a life are key to the complexity and the richness that trajectories encapsulate. At a time in which stable careers are less prevalent than they were in the past, risks can be a central factor in the dynamics of inequalities. It is this individualization and multiplication of uncertainties that makes the analysis of cumulative advantage and disadvantage over a lifetime a promising focus in the study of inequities.

Gender and intersectionality

During the 20th century, feminist and socialist schools of thought, as well as the social sciences in general, proposed and debated different ways of understanding the connection between social class and gender as the basis of inequality (Nicholson, 1990; Hartmann, 2000; Federici, 2015). Currently, the concept of "gender" has attained a central position in social theory. Therefore, to avoid elaborating on concepts that are already broadly understood, it will suffice to summarize as follows. The aforementioned schools gave rise to the notion of intersectionality (Stolcke, 1999; Hooks, 2004; Hill Collins & Andersen, 2013), which can provide a route to explore the complex configuration of different systems of domination by avoiding reductionist and schematic formulas. The different categories of

inequality—class, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, age, nationality disability, among others—mutually intersect, interact, reinforce, and moderate at different levels. The multidimensionality and interdependence of inequalities proposed from this theoretical perspective promotes an empirical enquiry that is open to the discovery of contemporary social complexities related to the combination of multiple forms of subordination and oppression, the specific processes in which they are produced/reproduced, and the resistances that hold out emancipatory possibilities. One of the sternest challenges of the intersectional approach lies in how to think about and study the categories of inequality not in additive terms but in a truly intersectional way; that is, by conceiving of class through gender, ethnicity, and other categories such as genderized–ethnicized class, and so on.

Although a range of different proposals have been used to theorize how class and gender are linked, the empirical approaches to their linkages have not been straightforward. Class analysis has traditionally omitted gender, regarding it as a separate issue. Controversially, John Goldthorpe argued that, for the operational purposes of a study, the occupational class of husbands should be taken as the occupational class of their wives, as the former had more stable jobs and higher pay. On the other hand, social class has been considered relevant in the field of gender studies, but generally, no attempt is made to measure it or to enter into a dialogue with class analysis.

Methodology

We pose the following question: How are working class trajectories molded by gender in terms of cumulative advantage and disadvantage? The location for this investigation was the largest urban conglomerate in Argentina: the Metropolitan Area of Buenos Aires. To address our question, we used the life stories technique—interviewing individual subjects in depth and using these interviews as the basis for constructing family histories. We stratified the sample by life purposes, according to sex and class origin, selecting men and women who were between 40 and 50 years of age in 2015, whose parents had working class occupations, and who were engaged in different types of class trajectories. The age criteria was important to ensure that the differences in the trajectories were not due to a stage in the life cycle. Moreover, by around 40 years of age, one expects to witness relative labor consolidation and stability.

We interviewed 14 working-class individuals as part of a broader study that included other classes. The class delimitation took into account position in the social space according to economic and cultural capital, but occupation was retained as the main class indicator. For their part, laborers

are those engaged in manual work or direct supervision of manual work, and have low overall cultural capital beyond their labor training. Hereafter, when we speak of working class, we refer to what Bourdieu called "classes on paper"; that is, an analytical construction that groups together nearby positions in the social space, irrespective of the possible formation of real groups through political organization.

The interviews were aimed at reconstructing class trajectories as well as the overall volume and composition of capital in each case, and crucial moments of change for individuals or families were examined in depth. The registration tools employed for the construction of the biographies were interview guidelines and the genealogical tree technique.

For the analysis of the life stories, grounded theory procedures were used (Strauss & Corbin, 2002). Although we did not adopt this strategy in all its components and implications, the textual information coding and constant comparison procedures were extremely useful for working with the stories, allowing us to control for the validity of interpretations (Seid, 2017; 2020).

Results

Our interviewees, born between 1965 and 1975, are part of a cohort of Argentinians who present differences from those born before 1960: they got married later in life, and, above all, have lived with a partner without being married. For half of them, their first experience of cohabitation with a partner was via a consensual union; moreover, on average, they had their first child later than previous generations, but a larger percentage stated that their first child was unplanned. Some trends became still more pronounced in the post-1980 generation; for instance, the consensual union came to be the norm, and marriage without prior cohabitation the exception (Binstock, 2009). Thus, in a certain way, this cohort is a transitional generation when it comes to these aspects of family demographics.

From a historical standpoint, the births of our subjects were situated at the end stages of the "state-centric matrix" (Cavarozzi, 1991), and their childhoods took place under dictatorships. They entered the job market in the 1980s and 1990s, were in their youth at the time of the hyperinflation crisis of 1989–1990, and experienced the great crisis of 2001–2002 as young economically active adults. The 1990s, labor flexibilization, and the increase in unemployment (Armony & Kessler, 2004) brought about differences in the conditions for entry to the job market, which were generally unfavorable in comparison with those their parents experienced.

Masculine and feminine silhouettes in class disadvantage

A commonality of the life stories analyzed in this section is that they all start from class positions located in the lower regions of the social space in terms of economic and cultural capital. The subjects' parents were laborers with limited qualifications, or marginal workers. None of the interviewees inherited a dwelling; each started working when they were adolescents; and almost all have limited levels of formal education. An unmet aspiration common to all the interviews is home ownership or occupancy of a home they feel is "truly theirs," beyond the "*villa miseria*"[3] or the space their relatives are able to give them.

In the cases analyzed, one of the main trends is the reproduction of the class of origin. However, the life stories allow for an understanding of disadvantage reproduced not through mere inertia or recurrence of the same, but as a process driven by changing situations and opportunities:

> I took out a loan at Bank C, a loan that they gave to taxi drivers. As a taxi driver, I was able to get one, and I bought a car and a license. But I paid back a ton on the loan, like nine *lucas* [thousand pesos] per month. Also I had the car expenses. On top of that I couldn't fill the car I got with [natural] gas; it used gasoline. Because of the problem the wife had, I couldn't work the hours I needed to work. I started to fall behind on the loan payments and ended up losing it [the car]. And I ended up in debt to the bank; I'm still in debt with the thing with the license [....] I lost the taxi months after she had the problem... nine months later. But that problem was what made my whole life difficult, because she did everything in the home: got the kids, brought them back, looked after them. I only concerned myself with working. (Facundo, supermarket shelf stacker, personal communication, 2015)

Facundo had been a taxi driver, among his other blue-collar jobs. He and his wife had four children, all of them still young. Both worked informally: Facundo full-time, and his wife in activities such as domestic cleaning paid by the hour and the sale of street-food. At a certain point, Facundo decided to take out a loan from a public institution targeted at taxi drivers who wished to buy their own vehicle. Soon after, his wife was sentenced by a court to home detention. In addition to being unable to work or bring in income,

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3 Translator's footnote: roughly translated as "shantytowns," *villas miserias* are overcrowded settlements on the peripheries of Argentina's largest urban centers that are characterized by rudimentary forms of construction and a lack of public utilities.

she was no longer able to carry out any domestic responsibilities outside the home; so Facundo took charge of taking his children to school and back, going shopping, and other tasks. His taxi did not bring in enough income to address domestic consumption (including rent), car expenses, and the repayment of the loan. In the end the taxi was impounded, but even then Facundo could not rid himself of the debt. He currently works twelve hours a days as a supermarket shelf stacker, and he takes his break in the afternoon at the time he has to pick his children up from school.

One of the patterns detected in the histories from the precarious fraction of the working class is the temporal overlap of difficulties whose effects are combined. The unequal distribution of risks based on social position, and especially based on economic and cultural capital, allows for an understanding of the conditions in which spirals of disadvantage are activated, as in the case of Facundo's family. Factors such as "low education level" do not trigger these processes in the abstract, but do so via the mediations and the particular forms they adopt in each specific process. Classification of the intervening factors will adjust better to the phenomena if it is carried out using the data rather than being assumed a priori or taken for granted. The sequence in which the events unfold can be decisive for the results, because if they had taken place in a different order, the interactions would not have occurred and the effect would have been different.

Although general mechanisms can be discerned among the agents occupying this class position, some specific forms of cumulative disadvantage arise more frequently among males, and others among females. Among the men, typically, one observes decisions or "stakes" in the economic sphere, such as a business venture, that ultimately prove problematic. Let us look at some examples.

Marcos's father and grandfather both alternated between work as industrial laborers and self-employment as *cartoneros* (informal and independent collectors of discarded cardboard, bottles, and other items from the streets for subsequent sale). The first stable and formal job that Marcos found was as a truck driver. After some years as an employee, the company offered to sell him a truck so that he could become a self-employed driver. Marcos knew that the strategy of owning one's own van had been beneficial to workmates, and so when the company made him the offer he saw it as an opportunity to increase his income and achieve the equally important symbolic benefit of occupational independence, even though the work would be exactly the same. Having his own truck to make deliveries was capital that offered the a priori prospect of being profitable. However, his income did not increase enough to offset rapid decapitalization due to the deterioration of the truck.

After some repairs, Marcos realized that he had not made a good deal. The dénouement came when the truck required a repair that was too costly to be worth the cost of investment in a used vehicle. "Self-employment" was no longer profitable at all and the company refused to hire him again. Marcos was forced to stop working and decided to file a lawsuit against the company. Moreover, on the psychological front, his unemployment led to symptoms of depression.

Pedro, who had an extremely vulnerable childhood on the streets, found a job as a butcher during his adolescence, which gave him a trade and the opportunity to learn to read and write. After many years as an employee, he opened his own butcher shop, which went well for a while. In 2008, during the crisis caused by the lock-out of agricultural producers in Argentina, Pedro's shop ceased to be viable because his rent went up and the supply of meat dwindled. Pedro's scarce cultural capital appears to have been an obstacle to his taking full advantage of the times when he was able to accumulate some economic capital. As he points out, there were periods when he had a relatively high income through his own butcher shop, during which he hired two employees. However, he feels that he "wasn't smart enough" and that, to an extent, he squandered his money on unnecessary purchases ("I was working well; in one year I switched cars five times"), and was no longer able to support himself when his business declined.

In the histories of both Marcos and Pedro, self-employment labor strategies proved too risky and were thwarted because their scarce economic capital stopped them from overcoming adversity, and because of the inadequacy of their subjective dispositions for business management beyond the job itself. Failures in business ventures recur across different social classes, but the effects are more severe in more deprived situations. Evidently there is a structural element in difficulties avoiding the devaluation of limited capital, but from an intersectional point of view the heightened risk among men is significant. Since it is they—having assumed the role of provider—who control and make decisions about this limited capital, when economic position and subjective dispositions go against them the resolution is likely to be inappropriate or hasty. This mechanism appears to have the effect of turning economic privilege into the risk of family bankruptcy. When the strategy founders, the men's female partners enter the stories as a source of emotional and economic support.

In women, cumulative disadvantage revolves around the burden of domestic and care work from a very early age, which impedes both educational progression and career development. Laura is a daughter of cotton planters from Chaco province who migrated to Buenos Aires to work: her

mother as a domestic worker and her father as a laborer. Her parents separated when Laura was 11 years old. After her mother left, Laura dropped out of primary school and began caring for her younger siblings. When she was 13 years old, she started working as a live-in nanny. At 16, she went to live with her partner, and soon became pregnant with the first of her two daughters. From then until her children were adolescents, Laura devoted herself full time to their care and to housekeeping. She then returned to domestic service for some years, until her daughters gave her grandchildren and she left paid work to become a full-time childcarer and homemaker again.

Juana's history is similar: her parents were sugarcane harvesters in Tucumán who migrated to Buenos Aires due to a lack of available work. When Juana was 15, she started working as a domestic helper. Because of a long and exhausting commute to work, Juana decided to stay with an aunt who lived in a *villa miseria* close to the city center. Soon after, she met her current husband and they started a family, settling in the barrio. When her children were born Juana left domestic service to raise them full time. Then, once the children reached adolescence, she went back to paid work for ten years, again in domestic service.

Crucial to understanding these trajectories is that both women were teenage mothers: Juana became one at 16 and Laura, at 14. Both left their work as domestic workers to care for their children full time. The main breadwinners in their families were their husbands, though the two women returned to the labor market sporadically, especially in periods in which their husbands were out of work. They do not interpret having left paid work to dedicate their time to childcare and homemaking as a handicap that cut short their personal development, but, on the contrary, a liberation made possible by their partners' efforts. Now that their children are grown with families of their own, the women remain homemakers and contribute to the care of their grandchildren. Although they are still less than 50 years old, they said nothing about returning to the job market when asked about their future expectations; rather, they see themselves as having retired from that sphere now that they are grandmothers. Thus, one can infer an interpretation of satisfaction based on achievements that go unrecognized in the public sphere, which speaks to the relative "disinterest" of some women in more legitimized forms of success (Markus, 1990).

A series of common traits can be identified in the histories of men and women from this class position. The insufficiency of economic and cultural resources form a feedback loop, involving dropping out from formal education due to the need to work at an early age. Social capital appears to have

worked as a kind of safety net at critical moments (such as unemployment) and as a source of assistance in specific circumstances (such as during the construction of a house). The conditions of dispossession left the trajectories at the mercy of contexts that the agents had difficulty controlling, with limited options for dealing with illness, unemployment, or unplanned pregnancy. These are unstable trajectories that are especially vulnerable to the contingencies of life, due to which some of the individuals tend to perceive their destiny as somewhat uncertain. What predominates in these stories is events that overtook what the agents had planned. These plans tend to be short-termist and aspirations are somewhat limited, focused inward—on children. In general, there are no firm desires to acquire cultural capital through formal education or to pursue other routes for themselves. There are educational aspirations for their offspring but these tend to remain abstract expressions, and are not translated into concrete plans.

In the most adverse circumstances, these agents lacked even a basic level of resources with which to assure themselves of any security. Their only sources of economic or moral support were relatives. Meanwhile, agents in more favorable situations could not exploit their economic resources to a degree that would have allowed them to achieve social mobility, due to a low volume of capital in their social networks—notwithstanding support at unfavorable moments—and given the difficulties of investing in things like education, which imply time horizons that are too long for the urgencies and the ups and downs that characterize these trajectories.

Although the common denominator in these cases is economic vulnerability compounded by precarious social capital, upon closer inspection of how these situations came about, gender differences become apparent. For the women, early motherhood meant prolonged absence from the labor market and the inability to depend on a dual income during their children's childhood. A series of factors, such as the need to care for their children themselves due to financial restraints and a job market that does not provide opportunities for progression, result in these women seeing the abandonment of the occupational sphere as the most reasonable and rewarding option, which redounds in trajectories of class permanence. Among the men, concentration on making a living yields occasional benefits, but a fragile economic position and a lack of cultural resources tends to impede their sustenance over time. Often, the spirals of disadvantage in which the men tend to remain caught are best understood in the light of what they take for granted when they explain the decisions and the risks they take: the role as economic provider, with its challenges and pressures.

Gender obstacles in the virtuous circles of cumulative advantage

In the families of workers who experienced no difficulties in assuring the reproduction of their everyday lives for prolonged periods, there was an intense propensity towards planning for their children's educational and occupational futures. In these cases, economic—and especially occupational—stability and the solidity of the family order appear to have been mutually reinforcing.

A disposition to make long-term investments routinely came up as one of the conditions enabled by family cohesion. Very long-term investment in their children's formal education emerged as a priority once basic family needs were met. Moreover, a series of concerns were transmitted from parents to children over the type of work the latter might aspire towards. In general terms, what clearly emerges in this set of cases, unlike those presented earlier, are life plans that are, to greater or lesser degrees, conscious and articulated.

One type of trajectory from these social origins is upward mobility propelled by a combination of mutually reinforcing resources. The clearest instances of social ascent are characterized by the joint accumulation of different types of capital, but also by the presence of certain subjective dispositions that combine rational calculation in life projects with morality of sacrifice. The resulting strategies appear to have been highly effective in providing opportunities for upward mobility.

Esteban was born into a working class family from the southern part of Greater Buenos Aires. His father was a train driver and his mother a domestic worker. The family drew income from the work of both parents, which gave them the income they needed for the children to finish secondary school. After dropping out of university and holding a few jobs, Esteban got a steady job as a bank employee, , where he moved through different positions and areas, including collections and customer service. He then pursued a vocational certificate in marketing and commerce, given the link between these subjects and his work. Soon after, he found work as a credit analyst at an industrial firm, where he went on to become an area head and, later, company treasurer. Keen to acquire further occupational expertise, Esteban embarked on a postgraduate program in finance at a private university, while he continued to work at his company.

In Esteban's intragenerational trajectory, social mobility came about through a combination of occupational and educational factors. After dropping out of his first degree course, Esteban chose a new higher education program in commerce, which was connected with the area of the bank where he worked. This qualification allowed him to acquire a more senior position at the bank and, subsequently, to get a better-paid position

at an industrial company. Although he did not choose the postgraduate in finance in order to boost his prospects within the credit area at the same company, he benefited from the close links between his educational and occupational requirements, gaining two promotions in the following years to his present position as company treasurer. Thus, in Esteban's case, the acquisition of cultural capital in the form of qualifications provided a high yield in occupational and financial terms, beyond even his own expectations.

Danilo was also born into a working class family in the southern part of Greater Buenos Aires. His mother combined housework with part-time work from home as a seamstress. His father was an operator, first in the automotive industry and then at a transport company. In addition to the income of both parents, the family owned their home, so their financial situation was stable. Danilo started working at 16 to meet his living expenses, but both he and his younger sisters were encouraged to continue their education. Danilo completed a licentiate in labor relations, and managed to pursue his profession in the public sector while still a student. Through his father, he met the secretary of training at a powerful union in the General Confederation of Labor, who gave him the chance to take charge of a project and, thereafter, to assume a permanent post as the union's national coordinator of training programs—the projects covered by this position attracted considerable funding from the public purse as well as multilateral organizations. Danilo is married and has two school-aged children with Valeria, an international relations major, whom he met through a professional contact in the public sector. Valeria works as a consultant providing technical assistance on public policy management. Her father runs his own construction business, which is a public works contractor. Danilo and Valeria have both undertaken postgraduate studies, which she has completed. Both also work as university professors.

Danilo's career course has been significant in terms of the intertwining and application of cultural and social capital. The jobs he had were always in line with his training and skills, but he attained them thanks to his personal connections. In addition, Danilo's social mobility was furthered by his marriage—his wife comes from a family that occupies a higher class position. In this case, the importance of social capital cultivated in public administration is also evident as it has functioned as a nexus between his university degree, his current job, and his personal life. This network of social relations has served to validate Danilo's university degree, increase his cultural capital, and provide earning opportunities, but it has also functioned as a marriage market.

The trajectories of both Esteban and Danilo, but above all the latter, encapsulate a series of mechanisms encountered in different cases, which prove useful as a source of material for a typical/ideal model of conditions that favor upward mobility from the working class: subjective dispositions acquired within a family of origin that emphatically inculcate morals of sacrifice, accumulation of different types of interlinking capital, well-delimited stages of the life course organized by goals at each step, and the formation of a new family through marriage to a partner with a higher position in the social space. In this model, what stands out is the absence of incidents that interrupted the process. And even in the cases within this class fraction that depart from the typical/ideal ascent, obstacles postponed or delayed certain plans but did not alter the course of upward mobility the agents were navigating. Conversely, the precarious portion of the working class encountered different kinds of obstacles that repeatedly forced them to distort intended courses of action and diminished the prospects of social ascent.

In the case of the women too there were trajectories in which similar mechanisms of cumulative advantage were activated, but, generally, these processes were not so intense: the ascent was more gradual and less dramatic.

Marisol was the eldest of seven children from a working class family, whose only source of income was her father's employment at a mechanical workshop. Marisol completed her secondary schooling and started work as an administrator at a food company. During this stage of her life, she also pursued her licentiate in business management, completing more than half the program. However, Marisol became pregnant during a casual relationship, and decided to have her child as a single mother. At that point she found a new administrative job at a leading company in the food industry, in which she still works. Marisol's siblings have either completed or are still studying at university. However, Marisol dropped out of college because after her child was born, her caregiving responsibilities and domestic chores consumed almost all her time outside the workday:

> I studied for a licentiate in business administration, but I didn't finish. I left when Tony was born, which I regret, but, oh well. […] Here I've made a career up to a point, but in truth the company also requires a university degree […]. I've tried but a lot of the time with Tony it's... I don't want to make excuses, even less blame him, but I think that now the priority is him. […] I think I've had my time; at least that's how I see it. (Marisol, personal communication, 2015).

The trajectory of Marisol and her family is nonetheless one of social ascent. In the labor and economic sphere as much as the cultural and edu-

cational domains, from one generation to the next, there was significant accumulation of resources: from the appreciation of a plot of land acquired by her father to access by her siblings to technical or professional occupations. Marisol perceives her situation to be better than that of her parents at the same age, but thinks that her ascent could have been greater if she had completed her university education, given that the company she works for provides more opportunities to employees who have a degree.

Marisol values family savings as the bedrock of economic stability, a culture of sacrifice, and education, seeing them as enablers of an upward trajectory, but her responsibility as a mother is the main factor that prevents her from fully realizing this trajectory. When she says, "I have had my time," we can infer, from the point of view of the reproduction strategies to which she refers, that medium- and long-term investments, such as those in education, would prove too costly and insufficiently worthwhile for her to aspire to further individual ascent. In a certain way, her mobility was frustrated by motherhood.

The cases presented in this section are illustrative of the trajectories that originate in the stable and formal fraction of the working class. Economic stability and opportunities for progress have been detected in each of the histories analyzed. The progressive accumulation of economic capital in the parental generation is typically manifested in the purchase of land, on which the family eventually builds a house. In addition to stability and relative prosperity in economic terms, the interviewees' families of origin have generally enjoyed notable cohesion (among other aspects, no parental separation emerges in these stories), had far fewer children than the previous generation, and started their families after completing their university education. The families of origin of these interviewees were characterized by their consolidated working class situation, with limited risk of abrupt descent; the parents provided their children with a set of advantageous material and moral conditions from which they could embark on their own trajectories.

The cumulative advantage processes visible in the trajectories of the interviewees were rooted in the legacies of the previous generation. In the intergenerational trajectory, the overlapping advantages entailed some combination of career and higher education. In some cases, such as that of Esteban, professional development was already underway when higher education catalyzed the process. In others, such as that of Danilo, university education enabled access to certain work environments that, in turn, were the places that generated the social capital necessary to take advantage of educational credentials. The acquisition of a university degree is in itself a stock of cultural capital, in both its incorporated and institutionalized

forms. A degree sanctions the practice of a profession, allows individuals to circumvent the mechanisms of social closure and access certain occupations, and, in this way, constitutes a channel for occupational ascent. It tends, albeit not automatically, to improve prospects for the accumulation of economic capital. Moreover, passage through university makes it possible to establish social ties that later function as social capital and improve opportunities in the marriage market. University education, within the realm of the possible, promotes virtuous circles characterized by the accumulation of different forms of mutually reinforcing capital.

This general mechanism is expressedin cases of both men and women. However, in the cases analyzed, the feedback between the forms of capital and the spiralization of advantage was more evident among the men. In the trajectories of women from these same social origins, we detected that the accumulated benefits did not produce great leaps forward because they were obstructed by disadvantages: primarily, caregiving responsibilities. Although none of the women from this fraction stopped working when they had children, none have "pursued careers" in the same way as the men. Moreover, some women who graduated from university did not enter a spiral of cumulative advantage because they were encumbered by the burdens of the domestic sphere. In sum, upward trajectories predominate within this class background, but greater difficulties were observed in the case of women's social ascent.

Conclusions

The cases studied in this article were grouped according to their belonging to the fraction of the working class subject to precarious labor or living conditions, or to the fraction of the same class with more stable and better paid jobs. It should be noted that this, as with all classifications, entails the modeling of phenomena whose traits can be more disparate in the social reality. Both sections of the working class have similarities in terms of their living conditions, in that they occupy adjacent positions in the social space.

In the trajectories that originate in the precarious working class, the proliferation of inherited disadvantage has been the most recurrent process. However, class reproduction took place through transformations and situations that changed over time, in contrast to what the notion of social mobility implies. Migrations, commercial ventures, changes of job, and relationships are some of the ways in which the trajectories were not mere repetitions of past family history but rather contained new elements that even opened up opportunities for ascent at certain stages. Nonetheless, the stages of economic prosperity were insufficient in magnitude or duration to

result in a qualitative leap in the family economic position. Unemployment or business failure were two of the ways in which restraints on social ascent were imposed on this class fraction and, in general, gains were put at risk. Scarce cultural capital operates by reinforcing disadvantage not only through the labor market but by via other routes as well, such as the dispossession of skills for evaluating and preventing risks or for readjusting strategies to overcome adversity. The fragility of the class situation did not impede economic progress, to whatever extent, but did hinder the consolidation and continuation of these gains.

The multiple risks and obstacles to ascent that agents from this fraction must confront tend to be marked and differentiated by gender. Among the women with unwanted pregnancies, especially during adolescence, leaving the job market to engage in full-time childcare all but guarantee the absence of social ascent. In the case of the men, assuming the role of breadwinner often left them more prone to risky or hasty financial decisions, which later proved ruinous to the family economy and to their own subjective wellbeing. Intersectionality between class and gender resignifies what each axis of oppression means on its own. The male status can imply patriarchal privileges but also disadvantages, such as greater family vulnerability, exposure to violence, or the additional burden inflicted by the financial responsibility associated with the role of provider.

As to the trajectories of the segment of the working class that enjoyed stable and formal jobs in the second half of the last century, social ascent was the typical result for the generation that followed due to the conditions that the families of origin possessed and generated. These families appear to have been, among the working class, those that were in the best position to take advantage of the structural opportunities for upward mobility that Argentine society provided in the second half of the 20th century. Their stable, protected, and well-paid jobs, in comparison to those of their precarious class counterparts, laid the foundations for possible strategies and investments in the long term; in the parental generation, the salient feature was the existence of savings to buy a home; for their children, it was the acquisition of educational capital. The characteristic stability of this class position was not only occupational or economic but also a characteristic of family organization.

The subjective family dispositions transmitted to the children was characterized by the primacy of definite expectations that this generation could surpass their parents in educational and occupational terms, and by a certain propensity to plan the life course into the long term: a characteristic that was absent in the more precarious fraction. In the different cases, there are

subtle variations in terms of the mechanisms and the forms of capital that had the most weight. When all the factors contributing to social ascent were presented in a single biography, these combined and reinforced each other to produce a spiral of cumulative advantage. And when the accumulation of different forms of capital formed a feedback loop , subjective conditions typically united the rational calculation of life projects with a morality of sacrifice.

Although there is a prevailing trend towards social ascent in comparison with their fathers, for some women there were discrepancies between the trajectory actually followed and the sphere of possibilities present in the objective situation. Both comparisons with male siblings and the women's own assessments of their aspirations and possibilities allow one to surmise the incompleteness of trajectories. One of the situations identified was that of the ascent that ended at the halfway point, cut short by motherhood, in which the agent's career prospects within an organization were restricted when she dropped out from a degree program—a decision that was, in turn, conditioned by the time consumed by paid work and caregiving responsibilities.

For all social classes, life stories give an understanding of some aspects of social mobility that tend to remain opaque under standard approaches. One of the aspects in evidence is that class trajectories are traversed by gender. The conventional proposals of social mobility, even when they include gender in their variables of interest, often limit themselves to ascertaining gender differences due to occupational segregation. The qualitative biographical approach used here allows us to observe class phenomena in the domestic sphere as well. Power relations and decision-making within the household, especially during certain points of transition such as the arrival of a child, vary according to class positions and make an impact on class trajectories through career paths, the distribution of domestic and carework, and life projects. The micro-social processes of cumulative advantage and disadvantage span all domains of our individual lives, not just the occupational one. Thus, the dialogue of class analysis and gender studies has the potential to yield more integrative explanations.

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