

Characteristics and functioning of a specific labor market: domestic service in Buenos Aires (late 19th and early 20th century)

Características y funcionamiento de un mercado de trabajo particular: el servicio doméstico en la ciudad de Buenos Aires (fines del siglo XIX y principios del XX)

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RESUMEN

Este artículo se centra en las características y el funcionamiento del mercado de trabajo organizado en torno al servicio doméstico en la ciudad de Buenos Aires a fines del siglo XIX y principios del XX. Analiza las diferentes instituciones sociales, culturales y legales que le dieron forma y sustento. Evidencia que coexistieron lógicas económicas, procesos culturales y prácticas sociales con distintos contenidos de racionalidad. Que la estructura y la dinámica específica que asumió condicionaron en gran medida lo que los y las sirvientes podían ser y hacer. Que la naturaleza particular de este mercado de trabajo dio lugar a relaciones de subordinación y dependencia que tuvieron efectos sobre la estructura de relaciones de aquella sociedad porteña.

Palabras clave: servicio doméstico; mercado laboral; trabajo libre; trabajo forzado.

ABSTRACT

This article focuses on the characteristics and operation of the labor market organized around domestic service in the city of Buenos Aires in the late 19th and early 20th century. It analyses the different social, cultural and legal institutions that both gave shape to it and laid its foundations. It shows that in its creation economic rationales, cultural processes, and social practices with different logics coexisted. It also shows that its specific structure and dynamics determined to a large extent what servants could do and be, and that the specific nature of this labor market favored relations of subordination and dependence that impacted on the social structure of that society.

Keywords: domestic service; labor market; free labor; forced labor.

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In Buenos Aires at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century, domestic service was among the most important occupations in the universe of labor.² It was a complex area of work and relationships which involved the performance of a myriad of tasks: cleaning, scrubbing, washing, ironing, cooking, serving the table, minding children, doing errands, delivering messages, etc. These and many other tasks contributed to the daily reproduction of family members, although not in an exclusive manner, since very often the limits between the domestic and business spaces were diffuse and permeable.³

This type of activity was generally carried out by ‘servants’ or ‘domestic workers,’ the two most widely used ways of designating them. At times, they were divided into various occupational figures thereby pointing to the existence of a certain hierarchical specialization in the sector: housekeepers, cooks, coachmen, gardeners, footmen, maids and male servants, nannies, and wet-nurses, amongst others.

This work occurred to a large extent (but not exclusively) in the domestic sphere. Servants formed part of the lives of families and the daily routines of their homes, and it was in this space of intimacy and proximity where their relations were defined. They could provide services to one or various employers, depending on the type of hiring they found most convenient, or simply what they could get. Some asked ‘for a bed,’ others worked for a family ‘without a bed,’ or worked ‘for some hours’ for various employers. These forms of work gave rise to very different relations and forms of dependency.

For those who were placed ‘with a bed’ (the most common type of labor relations at that time and place), service was a kind of permanent state. They were completely at the disposition of their employers. The absence of autonomy became more palpable since they lived in the same place that they worked. It also generated a situation of extreme dependence because it was through their employers that they satisfied their needs for housing, food, and clothing (just to mention the most basic ones). Furthermore, the development of the most diverse aspects of their lives – moments of rest and leisure, affective and family relations, religious and political practices – were dependent on this way of life.

Domestic tasks were in general activities socially attributed to women and indeed women did a majority of them. However, men also participated in this sphere.⁴ Boys and girls younger than 14 very frequently worked, while from six years of age (if not earlier) many were placed as servants or nannies to earn

a living (Pagani; Alcaraz, 1991, p. 35; Allemandi, 2015). On the other hand, the growing presence of migrants and foreigners, especially from Europe, suggests that domestic service was a door into the world of urban work and operated as a type of 'refuge-employment' for recent arrivals.⁵

Many arrived alone, others with their families. Sometimes they were summoned by parents or friends who had already settled in Buenos Aires. The latter figures were fundamental because in addition to providing support until the newcomers found employment or a means of living, they were often the nexus through which jobs could be found. Migrants could also arrive in the city as servants with employers who brought them after a trip. Finally, there were those who set out to migrate with more imprecision than certainties and whom, on arrival in the port (or the train station), found themselves often facing a city which was very different from what they imagined. When they did not have contacts in Buenos Aires, their early days could be very hard. For these, since 1887 there had existed the possibility of staying in the Immigrants Hostel when they arrived, where they had a roof guaranteed for five days and among its services was an office to deal with employment requests (Cibotti, 2000, p. 370). Once their stay in the Hotel ended, they had to find accommodation in tenements, rented rooms or huts to commence the search for employment or way of life (Scobie, 1977, p. 275; Gutierrez, 1982, pp. 72-73).

What options did those looking for domestic employment have? How did employers find servants? How was the labor market organized around domestic service? Which social, cultural, and legal institutions shaped and supported it? What were its characteristics and its operational logics? What was the nature of the market? What kind of working relationships existed there? What do these relations tell us about Buenos Aires society at that time?

This article proposes to answer these questions. It centers on the characteristics and operation of the labor market organized around domestic service in Buenos Aires at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century. The different social, cultural, and legal institutions that gave it form and support are analyzed. It shows that there coexisted economic logics, cultural processes, and social and institutional practices with distinct contents of rationality. In addition, the specific dynamics and structure it assumed was to a great extent dependent on what they and the servants could be and do. The particular nature of this labor market gave rise to relations of subordination and dependence which had an impact on the structure of relations in Buenos Aires society.

The set of sources used is wide and heterogenous: ordinances, projects and debates of the City Council; reports published by the National Department of Labor; advertisements published in *La Prensa* newspaper; notes and reports that from the *Fondo de la Sociedad de Beneficencia* in the Argentine capital, as well as documents prepared by the Advocates for Minors in their daily exchanges with women from charitable associations.

PRIVATE INTERMEDIARIES AND HOMES FOR SERVANTS

For those who needed employment, the most elemental means of starting this search was through relations or contacts in the city. Trying to find connections with ‘figures of reference’ in the neighborhood, subjects who, through the place they occupied or the function they played, participated (and reinforced) this type of ‘organic solidarity’ which could prevail in the vicinity. They could be merchants, grocers, innkeepers, stallholders in the market, or porters, who during their daily activities engaged in conversations with numerous neighbors and customers, forming potentially useful relations and sources of information.

Similarly, employers who wanted to get servants could comment to the same people who knew what was going on around them. Among the news could be information about offers for or requests of domestic service. In the pages of the daily newspapers it could be noted that those who sought work often indicated the address of a business, or pointed to two different addresses: one to obtain the ‘information’ or the ‘reasoning’ and another to ‘deal with’ it.⁶ As Martin-Fugier (2004, p. 41) highlights, either because of goodwill or because to some extent the exchange of this type of information formed part of their daily transactions, these figures could greatly facilitate the meeting between employers who wanted servants, and those looking for domestic employment. Although these situations refer to another type of strategy (publishing an employment advertisement), they also allow the assumption that applicants could count on some type of contact or figures of reference who provided information about them, acting as intermediaries.

In addition to these informal placements, there existed another possibility for migrant women who lacked contacts and who had arrived in the city with the intention of finding work as servants. Since 1912, *Colegio Asilo*, a school for young women who came from other provinces or countries “for the servant

profession,” had operated on Calle Pueyrredón no. 312. This establishment directed by the “Protective Association of Young Servants” offered “intellectual and moral” instruction and also trained them in washing, ironing, cooking “and the tasks of a servant.”⁷ Members of the Mary Immaculate religious congregation from Europe joined the project.

Since the beginning of the nineteenth century, institutions of this type had functioned in cities in Germany, Belgium, and France under a variety of names. In Paris, especially in the last third of the century, hostels which offered accommodation and employment opportunities to servants multiplied. In general, they were directed by religious orders (both Catholic and Protestant) which established restrictions related to worship, nationality, or the admission age, and were considered as transitory (and not permanent) places, and apparently those who could not afford their cost, paid with their labor. Literary sources from the time are very expressive and have left very critical descriptions of this type of establishment and the experiences of the young women housed there (Guiral; Thuillier, 1985; Martine-Fugier, 2004).

EMPLOYMENT ADVERTISEMENTS

Advertising was one of the most helpful ways of offering and requesting work, and it was one of the oldest forms after direct hiring. This form of searching for employment allowed a diffusion of unique information, accessibility, and practicalities: if the newspaper could not be bought due to a lack of money, then certainly some neighbor, acquaintance, or even the publishers themselves, would help; if it was not possible to read it (because they did not know how), some charitable soul could help with access to the written text.

La Prensa (LP) newspaper appeared for the first time on 18 October 1869 and ten years after its foundation it was among the most important in the city. From the printing of its first issues it told its readers that it published “all types of advertisements, at a modest price” (LP, 20 Oct. 1869). Advertising was a fundamental source of revenue, especially if it is considered that, unlike the other periodicals which circulated in Buenos Aires, it sought to establish itself without having to depend on the economic support of the government or subventions from political parties. Thus, as emphasized by Bressan (2010), remaining in circulation was dependent on increased sales of newspapers and

advertisements. Initially, for one peso per line the newspaper printed an advertisement for six days (LP, 22 Oct. 1869).

Initially the newspaper had only two pages and had a somewhat disorganized structure. Advertisements were published on the second page, mixed with the gossip, local news, and varieties (Bressan, 2010, p. 49). In November of the same year, it expanded its size and the number of pages, while modifying its format. Nevertheless, advertisements continued to occupy the last page (alongside the commercial and customs sections, public entertainment, and the times of the arrival and departure of steamships). Throughout the period in question, the newspaper's structure underwent various changes. Indeed, at a given moment advertisements were placed on the front page. The section was significantly extended and from a few marginal advertisements, it came to have various pages crammed with a wide variety of advertisements.

The classifieds section of the newspaper offered a wide variety of content which was not restricted to the offer and demand for workers, since a wide variety of goods, property, and services were chaotically scattered around its pages. In the mid-1880s, the classifieds began to be ordered alphabetically, and later to facilitate their reading and comprehension they were organized under specific headings, such as 'jobs,' 'property,' 'services,' etc. Furthermore, in the case of the employment section, over time it was divided into two separate blocks, 'jobs offered' and 'seeking work.'

A fortnight after the appearance of this publication, an advertisement was printed that was the prelude to what would shortly become the most important sector of activity in the employment sector: the supply and demand of domestic servants. On that occasion, Calle Temple no.13 (now Viamonte) asked for "an intelligent maid for the dining room and cleaning patios, who [could] give guarantees of her conduct" (LP, 8 Nov. 1869).

The expansion of the classified advertisements for domestic service was so rapid that in a very short space of time it became an important channel of access to the labor market. Indeed, towards the end of the 1880s, the supply and demand of domestic service was presented in a separate form (in a distinct section) from the rest of the employment advertisements, a practice that lasted until at least the end of the 1930s.

Information was provided in the advertisements that was considered important for obtaining formal employment. The first was the advertiser had to indicate if they were offering or needed domestic service. Nor could contact addresses or addresses 'to discuss' employment be missing. In addition to these

basic references, both from those looking for employment and those seeking servants, a series of attributes and/or conditions were given, which allow us to discover the qualities (positively or negatively) valorized and what requirements were made of those who participated in this market. Always present was the gender of the servants, above all in those 'mixed' jobs in which women and men were employed. The ending of the names of the distinct specialties was a key to knowing if male or female servants were required, due to the gender endings in Spanish (e.g. *servientes/as* or *mucamos/as* for male/female servants, and *cocineras/os* for female/male cooks), while when the gender was required was indistinct due to the words used, it was usually clarified.

Advertisers also indicated age, and if this was not made explicit, the use of terms such as 'formal woman,' 'formal man,' 'youth,' 'young woman or young man,' suggested – at least in an approximate form – the general age of those looking for employment, as well as the preferences of those looking for staff.

Another element that appeared was the nationality of the servants. The fact that those looking for work highlighted their country of origin or that they had recently arrived from Europe, shows that many employers must have considered this condition. In fact, some habitually stated this preference or asked those from a certain background not to apply.

In addition to gender, age, and nationality, there were frequent references to the marital status of servants. Expressions such as 'single' or 'without children,' 'married,' 'with children' were common since the fact of having (or not) this type of commitment was a valued condition, though not always in the same manner.

The advertisements also provided information about the characteristics of the employment or service sought. Most common was to ask for or offer servants 'for all services' or 'for all work,' or they would appear under the heading 'servant' or the expression 'for the service of a family' without any more references in relation to this.

On the other hand, when a servant was needed to travel or leave the city, or if they were willing to move, this possibility was indicated. When it was necessary for the servant to live in the home of the contracting family, this condition was made explicit with the expression 'with bed.' On the other hand, when the servant had to leave at the end of the day, this was indicated with the phrase 'without a bed.'

The size of the family was emphasized especially when the quantity of people to serve was limited ('for a small family,' 'for an elderly woman by

herself,' 'for three people') or when there were no children in the house ('married without children,' 'no children'). This data must have been fundamental for those looking for employment, since this preference was highlighted by some or directly stated as a condition.

After the turn of the century, there began to appear references to wages (something which is not found in other types of employment advertisements). While a concrete figure may not have been given, it was very common to make allusions to pay ('good pay,' 'low wages,' 'without pretensions') or to other forms of retribution which were part of the working conditions ('accommodation provided,' 'wages and clothing,' 'pays well and can learn a trade').

Another striking element was the reference to 'good treatment,' a hint that employers often mistreated servants, or that good treatment was not something that often came their way. On the other hand, while servants demanded good treatment, employers demanded guarantees from those they introduced into their houses. In the advertisements, those emphasize the need for 'good reports' or 'recommendations,' something which at the same time was an exclusionary condition, and those who could not comply with this were generally asked not to apply.

However, in addition to recommendations and knowledge of the *métier*, employers explicitly demanded a certain moral integrity from students ('formal,' 'trustworthy,' 'respectful'). These pretensions of formality, seriousness, respectability, and honesty appear to have been addressed to all servants, but above all to female workers as 'women,' and especially in relation to their sexual morality.

Taking into account the sheer mass of advertisements, it can be considered that a large number of labor contracts must have been made through this medium. By way of example, and to get some approximation of the size of this market, a random sample of advertisements from distinct moments in 1910 shows that the domestic service section published between 500 and 1000 advertisements per day. Employment requests were a dynamic medium which contributed to structuring the urban labor market.⁸

EMPLOYMENT AGENCIES AND EMPLOYMENT EXCHANGES

Employment agencies originated in France at the beginning of the nineteenth century. In the case of Buenos Aires, although they existed prior to 1870,

the first references to them can be found in the newspaper *La Prensa* a few months after its creation. Employment agencies (referred to as *conchabos* at that time)⁹ also facilitated contacts between employers and servants. In exchange for searching for and obtaining employment offers, the agencies charged a commission which was the main base of their business and the source of their profitability.

This logic of functioning did not always favor those involved, especially when the pursuit of profit became indiscriminate. Agencies depended on the instability of labor relations. If these did not prosper, the agencies profited from the return of their customers by charging new commission for further searches and placements. Many played with the possibility of presenting servants who did not meet the demands of employers, or sending servants to conflictive homes so that the parties would be obliged to change (either servant or employer, according to the case). In short, what was involved was achieving as many employment placements as possible (Guiral; Thuillier, 1985, p. 227; Martine-Fugier, 2004, p. 48).

Agencies published advertisements which appeared alongside employment advertisements (in newspapers' classifieds sections). Although they offered and requested male and female workers for different activities and under different headings, it was the specialties of domestic service and laborers 'for different jobs' which they most promoted.¹⁰ As the years passed, the prominence of this type of occupation was so strong that advertisements could be found from agencies working solely with the search for and placements of different types of domestic service, as well as others working exclusively with the placement of wet nurses.¹¹

While the agencies addressed their advertisements to employers and servants, it was the former they most tried to capture the attention of, highlighting not only the multiplicity of options they offered ("servants of all types," "of all nationalities," "for the country and city") but also emphasizing that the applicants for labor positions they sought were a guarantee ("special service," "with guaranteed recommendations," "trustworthy," "with good reports").¹² These differences in advertising strategies convey to an extent the diametrically opposed situations between those who wanted to be 'served' and those who needed to 'serve.' The former could chose whom they wanted to get; the latter were more constrained and had more limited forms of action as it would not have been possible for many of them to pay various agencies in advance to get offers of employment, especially if they were unemployed.

The expansion of these agencies was associated with the constant arrival of immigrants entering the urban labor market, and in 1870 government authorities created an Employment Exchange with the purpose of limiting the action of private agencies (Falcón, 1986, pp. 66-72). This decision, and the fact that municipal ordinances had tried to regulate and control their functioning since 1875, also suggests that the flow of contracts and *conchabos* made through their intermediation was substantive. Even though on this occasion the regulations were not implemented, their existence is revealing because it shows that the agencies and the commerce that they generated around them were seen as a problem that had to be resolved.

During the following decades, and with the intensification of the migration rates, private agencies expanded in number and activities. After the turn of the century, new ordinances were sanctioned to regulate the functioning of employment agencies in general. Despite the intervention of the public authorities in this business, it did not stop, as the state's capacity for control, inspection, and sanctions was limited.¹³

Judging by their importance among the public, it can be presumed that the agencies were among the most important means of access to domestic service. The quantity of job placements made through their intermediation represented a phenomenon that could be ignored. In 1906 the National Department of Labor reported the existence of fourteen agencies which had sought work for 24,755 people. Eight of these were specifically concerned with domestic service, five operated with all types of work, and one with solely with wet nurses. Placements for domestic service represented in this year at least 40% of the total. In 1912, the number of private agencies had practically quadrupled and 171,294 placements were made. Of the fifty houses registered in the city, half specialized in domestic service. According to reports, they found employment for more than 41,000 servants, in other words, they made more than 100 placements per day.¹⁴

INSTITUTIONAL CIRCUITS FOR THE PLACEMENT OF BOYS AND GIRLS

Along with direct and indirect *conchabos* in the urban labor market, where servants offered themselves and were looked for, a series of institutional practices were developed related to the development and placement of children and adolescents with private families to carry out domestic services, practices

which did not necessary respond to commercial logic. Although less important from the quantitative point of view, these types of placements imposed great complexity on the sector. They were official and supported by the Agency for the Protection of Minors, through the Public Defenders of Minors and those in charge of children's homes, many of which depended on the *Sociedad de Beneficencia* (Beneficent Society).¹⁵

Institutional placements were such a widespread phenomenon that some authors have described the public defendants of minors as 'employment agencies' alluding to the role of their staff as official agents who placed orphaned or abandoned boys and girls in family homes to carry out various forms of work (Szuchman, 1988, p. 71; Aversa, 2010, p. 38). While this takes into account the dynamic of official placements, it tends to reduce its analytical complexity, since these circuits had a series of mediations which could neither be reduced to nor resemble the mercantile logic of the agencies described above.

Since the beginning of the nineteenth century, the care provided to poor, orphaned, and abandoned children was a field of action shared (and disputed) by religious orders, public employees, and by the *Sociedad de Beneficencia*, amongst other similar associations. This institution was created in 1823 by the government of the Province of Buenos Aires when its administration and control was entrusted to women from distinguished local families. It received public funds to support the schools, homes, and hospitals for women and children (including: the School for Orphan Girls the Home of Orphan Girls, Betlemita Hospital and the Home for Abandoned Children), as well as the creation of other similar establishments. In 1880, after the federalization of Buenos Aires, it came under the control of the national government, a situation which allowed it to continue to expand, but which also resulted in a greater dependence on public funds, a trend which, according to Moreno, increased and continued until its dissolution in 1946 (Moreno, 2000; Pita, 2012; Villalta, 2012).

In addition to the *Sociedad de Beneficencia* another fundamental institution was created at that time, the Public Defenders of Minors which, due to its origins and because to a greater or lesser extent it moved beyond its original legal responsibilities, also had to intervene in family conflicts and to protect poor, orphaned, and abandoned children living in the city (Kluger, 1989, pp. 411-430). In 1881, the Public Defenders were created within the framework of the organization of judicial system of the Capital of the Republic (Law 1144), which also stipulated their responsibilities. The text of this law stipulated that these officials had to exercise the guard and official protection of minors and

the disabled; care for orphans or abandoned children, ‘conveniently’ placing them, and dealing with complaints about ‘misbehavior’ from their parents, relatives, or guardians (Villalta, 2005). In turn, the 1884 Regulations for the Public Defenders of Minors in the Capital granted them the authority to sign contracts with private persons who took minors under their charge (Aversa, 2010, p. 38; Kluger, 1989).

Who were these minors? Various studies from the area of childhood and of legal minority have emphasized that ‘minors’ did not exist as such, but it was a classification applied to a segment of the child and youth population which allowed a series of bodies and institutions to intervene (Zapiola, 2007; Aversa, 2006; Villalta, 2012). These were children and young people of both sexes whom, it was considered, were exposed to situations of abandonment, linked to ‘dangerous’ activities or simply were immersed in precarious family contexts which did not guarantee them with material support or moral restraint. ‘Minors’ were thus orphans, illegitimate children of single mothers, those separated from their families, with street trades (such as *canillitas* – newspaper sellers – and shoeshine boys), those who did not have a fixed address, delinquents, but also those whose parents were classified as ‘incapable’ as they were in poverty. In other words, minors were – to a great extent – basically the poor or very poor children who lived in the city.

They reached the Public Defenders through the intermediation of the police who arrested them and passed them on, through other institutions (such as hospitals or courts), through denunciations of neighbors, or at the request of the parents themselves (Villalta, 2012, p. 47). Some were returned to their families. Others, whom were placed under the control of the Public Defenders, were sent to houses for minors or houses of correction in which they were interned until their situation was resolved. The size of the problem is shown in municipal censuses, which in 1887 registered more than 4500 minors in children’s homes in the city and, between 1904 and 1910, somewhat more than 6500 between 0 and 14 years of age under the responsibility of public or private asylums (Aversa, 2006, p. 95; Zapiola, 2007b, p. 5). In turn, Emilio Coni identified for 1917 the existence of 35 homes for minors in the city of Buenos Aires (Ciafardo, 1992, pp. 22 and 62).

The establishments which minors entered did not depend on the Public Defenders, rather most were under the aegis of the *Sociedad de Beneficencia*. On the other hand, power to place them there was not exclusive to those former officials: the *Sociedad* also had wide-ranging prerogatives and did not

recognize limits on these practices of delivery and placement (Villalta, 2012, pp. 46-53).¹⁶ These intersections resulted in permanent interactions (and conflicts), revolving around the children whom the advocates were responsible for and the benefactors sheltered, but also around the placements which both made feasible (Villalta, 2012, pp. 46-53).

Staying in the establishments was supposed to be transitory, since the habitual destination of the majority of minors was the employment placement. As Aversa (2014) has emphasized, public authorities and those responsible for children's homes had various administrative tools at their disposition and instituted networks for the delivery and circulation of minors by means of which they sought to protect and 'regenerate' these minors, thereby channeling these trajectories of life which caused concern since they were anchored in misery or bordering on the world of crime.

The idea of the 'recovery' of minors through work was legitimated by a wide range of doctors, jurists, public health specialists, and lawyers (in their roles as intellectuals and public employees), though also by women from the charitable societies and the religious orders. Work was seen as a tool for discipline and the moralization of the poorer classes and as a mechanism for restraining and integrating poor children who, once identified as minors, became subject to official protection and guardianship. Once they entered the 'cycle of guardianship' they remained in a perpetuating state of legal and social minority (Villalta, 2012, pp. 58-60; Aversa, 2010).

Employment placements had to comply with a series of functions. On the one hand, the alimentation and clothing needs of the children had to be satisfied, but placements means that the state and its care providing arm (*Sociedad de Beneficencia*) did not have to provide them with material support while they reduced the pressure on children's homes – always crowded and with limited resources.¹⁷ On the other hand, minors had to be taught a trade which could provide them with a means to live and permit their integration in the social order as 'useful' workers. Furthermore, the minors provided with placements had to correct the noxious habits and customs acquired in their social environment of origin from which they were 'rescued' – the street, the *conventillo*, the family (Villalta, 2012, p. 62).

The placements made by the *Sociedad* were registered and formalized through a 'commitment form' in which the parties' responsibilities were specified. By way of example, *Casa de Huérfanas* (the Orphans Home) used a model contract at the end of the century which stipulated that the President of the

Sociedad “would deliver” to the custodian (used in the masculine) a minor girl “to serve him.”¹⁸ The custodian took her under his care under the condition of “caring for her and educating her morally and religiously” and of “providing for her food and clothing.” In turn, it was stipulated that there would be no obligation to pay a wage until this minor turned 18, at which moment a wage would be agreed with the Advocate of Minors. The minor thus placed could be removed from the house in question in the event of the death of the custodian or non-compliance with the contracted obligations. Furthermore, once the minor in question turned 14 (the age established in the Civil Code) they could comply (or not) with the agreement. This also had to be ratified by a Public Defender of Minors, who in turn had to monitor compliance with the agreement.

By the end of the nineteenth century, domestic placements were not the only possible labor destination. In effect, minors (especially boys) began to be placed in shops, workshops, ranches, or military detachments as the state’s need for control of the territory increased and the local economy was transformed (Aversa, 2010, pp. 38 and 44). Nevertheless, the deliveries of servants and *criados* never waned and it continued to be an unavoidable destination for the majority of them. Between 1883 and 1907, the domestic collocations made (or ratified) by the advocates represented between 72% and 100% of those registered by the two public defender offices in the city. In absolute terms, their number was variable, fluctuating between 200 and 1000 placements of minors as servants or (to a lesser extent) apprentices per year (Aversa, 2010, p. 331).¹⁹

Near the end of the century, the public defenders of minors began to openly question the women from the charities about their very extensive practice of removing minors from children’s home to work as unpaid servants. They argued that the boy and girls in these placements should be compensated for the work they carried out with a modest wage, stating bluntly that the relationships created through these institutional practices were centered on work. Furthermore, they pointed out that these were ‘uncontrolled’ practices which did not comply with the country’s civil laws about the exercise of guardianship and the age stipulated for minors to begin to receive a wage (15 years of age).²⁰ What they were asking for was that the terms of the commitments be modified and that the public defenders be able to control the women from the charities.²¹

Although the public defenders questioned the domestic placements made by the *Sociedad*, they themselves did not achieve very different results.

Concerned with removing them from the streets, they placed girls and boys where they could, and under the guise of giving them a trade, ended up facilitating access to child labor at a very low cost. Thus, as stated by Aversa (2010), due to the tensions and cracks typical of the dynamics of daily life, these placement practices rather than ensuring instruction in trades linked to the demands and needs of the economy, became a mechanism to deliver boys and girls as servants and *criados* without many expectations of progress.

Judging by the irregularities and conflicts that arose and by the number of boy and girls who fled from the homes in which they were placed, these delivery and placement practices constituted a possibility of accessing cheap labor, without many controls of the contractual requirements on the part of the authorities.²² The circuits were based on established social behavior, customary behavior which went beyond the proper institutional mechanisms (Cicerchia, 1994a, p. 60; 1994b, p. 204).

On the other hand, as Zapiola (2007a, pp. 43-44) has pointed out, relations between the public defenders, the benefactors, the poor boys and girls and their families is evidence of the persistence of 'old models,' in which public authorities shared with private individuals responsibility for protecting 'orphans and abandoned children.' In this sense, the systems for the delivery and placement of young children were the clearest expression of the dual (public and private) nature of policies aimed at this segment of poor children, but also the importance that these had in private homes and informal and extralegal private practices.

DISTRIBUTION OF INDIGENOUS PEOPLE

Poor girls and boys in the city were not the only subjects made into 'minors' in terms of their legal and social status. During the so-called 'Conquest of the Desert,' hundreds of indigenous women and children were subjected to informal and extralegal deliveries and forced to work for *Porteña* (Buenos Aires) families at the end of the nineteenth centuries. The arrival of these Indians deliveries were massive and spasmodic, because they were dependent on the fortunes of military campaigns (which were translated into the possibility of controlling territories and submitting populations), administrative routines (involving the military, police, justices of the peace, priests), or the relocation needs of these captive populations.

The fate of many indigenous peoples was entrusted by the national government to women from charities. For example, in 1878, with a cover page that stated “Protection of indigenous peoples and their placement,” the “list of indigenous peoples placed by the *Sociedad de Beneficencia*” for the month of December of this year recorded the following:

... A captive Indian woman with a child and an Indian were two children were sent to the *Casa de Expósitos* (abandoned children’s home)...

... An old Indian woman with an 18 year old daughter was sent to the Orphans’ Home...

... Sra. Carolina L. del Campo, Temple 631, was given a young Indian girl...

... Sra. Paz domiciled at Calle Rivadavia 710 was given two young Indians, one a male and the other a female...

... Sra. Petrona E. de Mones (in Belgrano Pueblo) took an Indian woman with two children...

... Sra. De Walls a *chinita*...

... Nicolasa de Terrero a 10 year old Indian called José María son of Casimira ...

... Sra. Francisca C. de Campos received the Indian girl, aged between 8 and 10...

... Sra. Dolores Maldonado de Conde, Cuyo 553, an 8 year old Indian girl, daughter of Manuela Morales. She also took...

... Petrona D. de Debacino, Corrientes No. 674, took the Indian Isabel Torres between 24 and 25 years...

... Sra. Manuela V. de Novoa, Andes 56, took the Indian Micaela, 30 years of age more or less...

... Avelina C. de Camelino, Cangallo 873, took Carmela, between 30 and 35 years of age, with a one year old daughter...

... Adelaida B. de Burgos – Rivadavia No. 652 took the Indian Remigia with a one month old son...

... Señor Doctor Manuel Augusto Montes de Oca a young Indian boy son of the chief Pincen – called Merenao and aged 7...²³

In total 285 indigenous women and children were given to families in Buenos Aires on this occasion. The registration form reifies them. Often the record do not state their names, calling them 'Indian woman,' 'old Indian woman,' 'little Indian,' 'Indian with children.' The status of legal and social minority to which they were reduced justified the necessity of this guardianship. The contrast between the form of identification of the man or woman receiving them, with their full names and surnames, and how the women and children placed were registered, in a much more irregular, imprecise, impersonal and anonymous manner, is striking. Furthermore, after giving the (limited) details of the Indians and the person receiving them, on the right margin of the page the number of indigenous people placed with this person was summed up (using number, like an accounting table), and at the end of the page a line was drawn, under which was placed the subtotals, which were added at the end of the list. In 1885 another wave of placements was made at the request of the Ministry of War.²⁴ At this opportunity a legion of 325 indigenous people were distributed through the signing of contracts between the *Sociedad de Beneficencia* and private individuals.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

In the shaping and expansion of this private labor market which was constituted around domestic service, there were different access and placement circuits. An overview shows that each of these was subject to specific logics. This demonstrates that domestic service was constituted in an environment where social, economic, cultural, and politico-institutional processes converged, which modeled the dynamics and appearance of this market, which were not always the same. At times, it presented itself as an environment in which waged labor relations should prevail organized through the supply and demand of workers 'free' to be hired (although always conditioned by specific socio-historic circumstances and contexts). The daily mass of employment advertisements, the numerous employment agencies in the city, and the agreements made to start employment relations are good examples of this. In other cases, the sector incorporated subjects who were far from being able to choose their destiny. This is the case of the boys and girls placed as servants and *criados* or the indigenous populations who were put into the service of Buenos Aires' families.

This evidence challenges the history of labor to the extent that domestic service gave rise to waged employment, but also to other forms of remuneration, to various 'arrangements' which included unpaid work, to ties of dependency and subordination, and to forced contexts of labor. All these situations can be added to other available evidence and undermine those interpretation which assume that in the processes of economic modernization in Argentina only free relations of labor were established, especially if we consider that domestic service was one of the most extensive and numerous sectors of activity (Campi, 1993; 2002; Aversa, 2010; 2016; Pita, 2016). In addition, they invite reflection on the nature of the domestic and social relations which structured Buenos Aires society based on the evident vulnerability and inequalities.

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NOTES

¹ Doctorate in History from Universidad de San Andrés (UdeSA). Licentiate in Sociology, Universidad de Buenos Aires (UBA). CONICET Postdoctoral Fellow. Professor Latin American history (JPG) and a researcher in the Center of Political History Studies (CEHP), Universidad Nacional de San Martín (UNSAM). Professor of Western Social History at Universidad de San Andrés. She was awarded by the Latin American and Iberian Association of Social History (ALIHS) the prize for the best doctoral thesis in social history in 2017.

² Population censuses show that in 1869, the sector absorbed around 20% of the total of the ‘occupied’ population, with 20,000 male and female domestic workers. Its relative importance gradually declined and in 1914 it represented around 8%, but nevertheless, in absolute terms this labor segment continued to increase its ranks and quadrupled its number, surpassing 90,000 workers (ALLEMANDI, 2015).

³ This type of work was not exclusive to the home at a time when the limits between the public and private were not clearly demarcated. Many homes were spaces of work while commercial establishments served as residences for employers and employees. Employment advertisements published in local newspapers show that shops employed ‘servants.’ Arrangements for working and living in the same establishments were frequent. Cohabitation with employers implied a quota of daily tasks, proximity, and intimacy which allowed these relations to be thought of as if they were of a ‘domestic type’ (GAYO, 2000, p. 51; SOUZA, 2010, p. 107).

⁴ In 1869 approximately thirty in every hundred servants were male. Their relative importance declined and in 1914 they represented 10% of the workers from the sector. The presence of males in domestic service has been observed in other Latin American and European cities. In Mexico City, a little more than 21% of servants were male in 1910 (GOLDSMITH, 2007, p. 90). In Rio de Janeiro, between 1870 and 1900 around 20% or 30% of those in domestic service were male (SOUZA, 2010, p. 122). In Paris, men represented 31.7% of domestic workers in 1851 and 17% in 1901 (GUIRAL; THUILLIER, 1985, pp. 10-11).

⁵ With the largescale immigration in the final quarter of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, there was a substantial change in the profile of domestic workers. Until then, the majority had been poor creoles, blacks, and mulattos (many of them were former slaves and their descendants), *Chinos* (indigenous peoples or *mestizos*), this relationship between ‘natives’ and ‘foreigners’ began to be reversed in favor of the latter and by the end of the 1880s their presence surpassed that of the ‘natives.’ In 1914, foreigners accounted for more than 70% of workers in the sector (ALLEMANDI, 2012; 2015).

⁶ “Mother and 15 year old daughter offer themselves for all types of service, in the countryside or city, *Alsina 1521 and 25. Almacén*”, *La Prensa* (LP), 25 ene. 1905; “A Spanish servant without children offers herself for a family of four people or more, needs a place for her husband who has a trade and in exchange for food can provide some small services, *for information 591 Shoe shop, to discuss Chile 1930, no. 12*”, LP, 1 febr. 1890. Unless otherwise stated, throughout the articles the emphasis is added.

⁷ Biblioteca Nacional (BN). *Estatutos Generales de la Asociación Protectora de la Joven Sirvienta*, Buenos Aires, Casa Editora Alfa y Omega, 1914, pp. 3-6. The Commission of the Association was initially formed by: Mercedes Avellaneda de Dellepiane (president), Susana Funes de Pizarro Lastra (vice-president), Luisa Madero de Martínez de Hoz (secretary), María Susana Castilla (vice-secretary), Alcira Gianello Lértora (treasurer), Delia O’Gorman (vice- treasurer).

⁸ A column containing approximately between eighty and one hundred notices on a page with seven columns. Approximately half belonged to the ‘domestic services needed’ and ‘domestic services offered’ sections. The relationship between offered and needed under the same headings were balanced, although generally there were more announcements for needed than for offered.

⁹ In those years two forms, *conchabo* and *conchavo*, coexisted. Although the second option fell into disuse, during the study period both alternatives were considered correct.

¹⁰ “*Conchavos*. In the Agency at Potosí No. 427, two Basque laborers, a couple, maids and cooks are needed, and butlers, dependents, coachmen, maids, cooks and laborers have to be placed” (LP, 2 jun. 1870).

¹¹ “Agency of the French ladies, *Calle Tacuarí*. Places for cooks, maids, nannies, and also looked for are those with recommendations who wish to honor us with their trust will be duly served. Also sought are servants of all classes, free for employers. Tacuarí 287 Agency” (LP, 27 ago. 1880); “To wet nurses. From today wet nurses can go to the Nurses Office on Calle Tacuarí 185, the first established in Buenos Aires, where they can obtain excellent placements. Open from 9 - 5 in the afternoon” (LP, 24 abr. 1880); “Wet nurses. Only first class, Basque, Lombard, wage from 30 a 60\$. Corrientes 1566, Irene Gay Agency” (LP, 3 jun. 1905).

¹² “Domestic service. Families who need a *special trustworthy service, with good recommendations*, will always find it, with good cooks, maids and male servants, nannies, wet nurses, porters, gardeners, etc., etc., in the agency on Calle Cerrito number 51 between Piedad and Cangallo” (LP, 2 oct. 1880).

¹³ In 1908, a law was enacted to improve the regulations of employment agencies. Due to the ineffectiveness of municipal controls, new regulatory bills for agencies connected with domestic service were presented in 1912 but they received no support. The only modification made to the regulations in force occurred in 1913 and was aimed at improving the records of agencies to reinforce the forms of identification and control of domestic service. República Argentina, *Digesto Municipal de la Ciudad de Buenos Aires. Recopilación de leyes, ordenanzas y decretos por José Matías Zapiola (hijo)*, Edición Oficial, Buenos Aires, Talleres Gráficos de L. J. Rosso y Cía., 1918, Chapter XX: “Reglamentación del servicio doméstico y oficios,” pp. 477-478.

¹⁴ The data offered only includes placement by the specialized agencies in the area. Domestic service placements by other (general) agencies are not included as they could not be differentiated. República Argentina, *Boletín del Departamento Nacional del Trabajo*, n.27, ago. 1 1913, Buenos Aires, Imprenta “Alsina”, 1913, p. 497ff.

¹⁵ The analysis of the delivery and placement practices made by the public defenders of minors and by the *Sociedad de Beneficencia* are based on notes, comunicués, and bulletins contained in the “Instituciones de la Sociedad de Beneficencia y Asistencia Social (1823-1952)” file, available in the AGN.

¹⁶ These powers received legal support following the passing of the Civil Code in which it was established that “children admitted to hospices, or to orphanages of any kind, and of any name, shall be under the care of the administrative commissions” (Art. 396). Invoking this article and later a decree from 18 June 1904 which supported them, the charities demanded the right to freely deal with all the minors in their establishments, even those who had been sent by defenders (VILLALTA, 2012, pp. 46-53).

¹⁷ In 1891, the President of the Society sent a note to the public defender of minors, Ramón

de O. Cesar, in which she stated that she could not cope with the quantity of children who requested admission on a daily basis to the House of Orphans because they were 'lacking resources.' The defender replied that frequently 'well-off' people presented themselves asking for the charge of minors "to take care of their upbringing and education." He asked the President for a list of minors in a condition to be delivered, to give them "adequate placements." Nota del 3 de julio de 1891, AGN, Sociedad de Beneficencia de la Capital (SBC), *Defensoría de Menores*, Legajo 57, 1824-1895, vol. 1, folio 131.

¹⁸ These forms only contained: on the side of those receiving the child, name and address; on the side of the minor, name, the number given for identification, and the establishment at which they would be in when they needed to be removed. We have used as a model a 'Commitment' signed in 1887. Nota del 30 de septiembre de 1887. SBC, *Casa de Huérfanas*, 1823-1912, legajo 46, vol. 2, folios 110 a 111.

¹⁹ The records of public defenders do not take into account the total of institutional placements. The authorities of homes for minors could also make placements and this was not always informed to other employees. In addition, we constantly find notes which show the tensions generated between defenders and the female benefactors from charities due to the irregularities at the moment of providing information about the destination of the children.

²⁰ The Civil Code established that "those who raised someone [could not] be obliged to pay him wages for the services provided until the age of fifteen. Nor [would] tutors be obliged to pay wages who [kept] in their company minors of fifteen years, because they could not give them accommodation." *Código civil de la República Argentina...*, cap. VIII, "De la locación de servicios".

²¹ Nota del 20 mayo 1895. SBC, *Defensoría de Menores*, Legajo 57, 1824-1895, vol. 1, folio 334; Nota de diciembre de 1895. SBC, *Defensoría de Menores*, Legajo 57, vol. 1, folio 344; Notas del 28 nov. 1903. SBC, *Defensoría de Menores*, Legajo 4, años 1896-1904, vol. 2, folios 251 a 261.

²² The *Sociedad de Beneficencia* placed children as servants, but also as 'sons.' From the legal point of view, there did not exist the figure of 'adoption,' these placements *did not* create family relations since that in these homes the children did not have kin or the right to inherit. It should not be forgotten that only in 1948 was Law 13,252 passed, which was the first to regulate adoption. The Society remained the 'legal guardian' of the minors in placements and could request their return in the case of irregularities (VILLALTA, 2012, pp. 46-47).

²³ SBC, *Servicios Extraordinarios* (sin catalogar), 1823-1900, vol. 1, folios 128 a 135. The expression *china* or *chinita* designated those people of Indian or *mestiza* descent.

²⁴ SBC, *Servicios Extraordinarios*, vol. 1, folio 151 a 136.