

**“We have everything and we have nothing”: *Empleados* and
Middle-Class Identities in Bogotá, Colombia: 1930-1955.**

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**Thesis submitted to the faculty of the Virginia Polytechnic Institute
and State University in partial fulfillment for**

**Master of Arts
In History**

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**April 27, 2001,
Blacksburg, VA**

**Keywords: Middle Class, twentieth century, empleados, white-
collar workers.**

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(Abstract)**

No class has created more controversy than the middle class and nowhere has it produced more controversy than in Latin America. No class has been so poorly understood. No class has been so weakly analyzed in historical terms. Moreover, no class has had so many preconceptions and “myths” attached to it. I try to fill this historiographic gap by looking at the construction of *empleado* identities, as a part of the middle class, between the 1930s and the 1950s in Bogotá, Colombia. By using a diversity of primary sources - diaries, *empleado* handbooks, manuals, employment forms, historical statistics, government publications, personal archives, oral history and a set of novels - this thesis attempts to look at how *empleado* identities were “made” by means of the combination of the historical structures and the experiences lived at the very center of daily life.

Acknowledgements:

The image of the lone scholar laboring in creative solitude is perhaps the most enduring myth of academic life. Research and writing are collaborative process shared with family, friends, and friends. There are numerous people who inspired, assisted, and encouraged me during the research and writing of this thesis. I would like to thank the members of my thesis committee: John Green, friend and professor, welcomed me into the graduate school in history; Linda Arnold helped me clearly formulate and present my ideas and her bibliographical suggestions have always been useful; finally, Justo Ulloa convinced me that there are many histories to be told.

In addition, I would like to offer my thanks to my “office-mates” for making the graduate student life less stressful, and to my friends in Mexico City, *camaradas and amigos*. Once again, I would like to give special thanks to Maria Isabel Cortés and Valentina López Córtes for their patience with both my hysterics and my histories. Words can scarcely express my love and gratitude with them.

This is for my country, for my people, with the hope that knowing the past might brighten our future.

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Cómo es que te vas Salvador de la compañía, si todavía hay mucho verdor. Si el progreso es nuestro oficio y aún queda por ahí mucho Indio que no sabe lo que es vivir en una ciudad, como la gente. Qué no ves que eres un puente entre el salvajismo y el modernismo, Salvador el ingeniero, salvador de la humanidad. Está muy bien lo que tú piensas, pero, por qué no te acuerdas que la nuestra es una civilización muy avanzada, como dice la gente. . . Trópico de Cancer, Café Tacuba. (Mexico, RE, 1994)

Introduction

I used to work in a health insurance company. Along with thousands of women and men of varied backgrounds and work agendas, I worked as a temporary information processor during several of my undergraduate years. I encountered many different people who performed clerical work as a way to support their studies or their families. One afternoon another worker and I were asking for our monthly paychecks when suddenly this person said to me, “Don’t you think we are underpaid? We are paid like factory workers, but we are not factory workers. We are *empleados*; there is a big difference. We are middle class *empleados*.”* This experience with everyday clerical work later influenced my interest in writing a history of the *empleados* in Colombia during the twentieth century.

The cultural artifacts of the twentieth century Colombian middle class include literary works. In 1938 two novels, *Los del medio (Those in the Middle)* by Augusto Morales-Pino and *Hombres sin presente (Men without Present)* by José Antonio Osorio-Lizarazo, portrayed many people who worked as secretaries, bank clerks, and *empleados* in different workplaces. These stories explored where

* Both *empleado* and *obrero* will be used in Spanish because those “terms” were historical constructions that shaped *empleado* identities. *Empleado* can be translated as a white-collar worker, and *obrero* as blue-collar worker.

and how people worked, how they faced problems at home and in the workplace, how they spent their money, and how they understood their lives. These cultural artifacts demonstrate frustrations, dreams of the future, and perceptions of themselves, their place in society, and their assumptions about the world around them.

In one passage of *Los del Medio*, Enrique, an *empleado*, is in a cafe remembering many episodes from his life. One of them is his frustration at not being able to marry an “upper class woman.” He feels that she is from another world: “She is rich.” Enrique does not have anything to offer her, other than his love, his work, and his knowledge of life. According to Enrique, money is not the most important thing. At one point, he asks himself: “Why do I not look for other friends of my own social status? Why I do not find some one from the lower class who could see me as an important person?” No, he replies to himself; it is impossible. Although he wishes it, he cannot marry a lower class women because his status, his ideas, his values, his thoughts, and the way he was brought up would not allow him to do that. As he states, “I want to climb up, not down.” After many hours he concludes that the only way to be someone in life is to work hard and to study a lot. However, in agony he realizes that, “. . . in my work I cannot earn enough money to be someone.” At that moment an acquaintance comes over and asks him: “What is with you? What are you

thinking?” He replies: “We belong to the middle ground. We are middle-class people, are we not?”¹

This passage raises important questions: What did *empleados* mean when they called themselves middle class? What did belonging to the middle class mean? How did *empleados* perceive their social role? Historians have consistently overlooked those questions. I attempt to fill this historiographic gap by looking at the construction of *empleado* identities as a part of the middle class between the 1930s and the 1950s in Bogotá, Colombia.

No class has created more controversy than the middle class and nowhere has it produced more controversy than in Latin America. No class has been so poorly understood. No class has been so weakly analyzed in historical terms. Moreover, no class has had so many preconceptions and “myths” attached to it.² Consequently, the middle class as an historical topic is relatively new.

Even though historians have only recently begun to grapple with analyzing the formation of Latin America middle classes, Colombian social scientists began grappling with and compiling information on their middle class by the 1930s. During the first half of the twentieth century, social scientists

¹ Augusto Morales-Pino, *Los del Medio* (Bogotá: Editorial ABC, 1938), 135; José Antonio Osorio-Lizarazo, *Hombres sin presente* (Bogotá: Editorial Minerva, 1938). Osorio Lizarazo was an *empleado* as well as writer and novelist. There are many letters and writings in his archive in which the author argues that “. . . we are middle class, I and my family are middle class. This class is the heart of our Colombia. The middle class is the most suffering class in Colombia. We have everything and we have nothing; we are middle class, we think we have all, but we do not have anything.” José Antonio Osorio-Lizarazo’s Archive, Box 0-22, Folder: 5, 4, 1942, typescript. (Hereafter: AJAOL) All translations are mine.

² D. S. Parker, *The Idea of the Middle Class: White-Collar Workers and Peruvian Society 1900-1950* (Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998), ix.

applied positivistic and biological theories to the study of societies of Latin American in general, and Colombian in particular. Based on a deep faith in the power of “modern science’s ability to “improve” the human condition, positivist theorists attempted to overcome “Latin America’s backwardness” in order to increase wealth and produce more “developed countries.” The positivist approaches stemmed from the writings of Auguste Comte, a French engineer and the father of positivism, who commented on the possibility of creating a perfect society by applying natural laws. As understood in many Latin American countries, positivism also incorporated the Social Darwinism of Herbert Spencer. Consequently, membership in the middle class was thought of as a way to reach independence by becoming a self-made man, a capitalist whose constant, steady striving permitted not only the achievement of personal wealth but also material “progress” for society.³ Luis López de Mesa’s 1932 analysis of Colombia middle class, influenced by Social Darwinism, argued that although Colombia needed a middle class, it was impossible to find one. The geographical, biological, and racial characteristics of Colombian were the reasons than an “authentic middle class” did not exist. In contrast to the United States, López de Mesa remarked, Colombians were people poor in virtues, moral values, and spirit. They were “racially backward” and lacking in culture, hard

³ Pamela, Murray, *Dreams of Development, Colombia’s National Schools of Mines and its Engineers, 1887-1970* (Tuscolosa: University of Alabama Press, 1997), xi. See also Richard Graham, *Race in Latin America, 1870-1940* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990). For Colombia, see Marta Saade and Oscar Calvo, “La ciudad en cuarentena, patología social y profilaxis.” (forthcoming).

work, thrift, and self-discipline which, López de Meza thought, were required for “progress.” “The failings of the middle class” were due to:

. . . masas ignorantes, pobremente educadas, llena de enfermedades, mal vestidas, sin espíritu, sin educación . . . Esta gente son los *mestizos*, indios, que nunca podrán ser capaces de mejorar su posición social. Esto hace imposible nuestro sueño de crear una clase media como principal ruta para el progreso de nuestra nación.⁴

In contrast, John Johnson attempted to analyze the middle class from another perspective. Johnson argued that the growth of “middle sectors” was one of the most important characteristics of twentieth century Latin America. For Johnson, the “middle sectors” were a product of the rise of the public sector, public education, urbanization, industrialization, nationalism, state intervention, and most importantly, the move, albeit halting and imperfect, toward democratization and the broadening of the electorate.⁵ Johnson’s succinct formulation made a profound impression throughout the Americas and came to symbolize the vision of mesocratic reformism as one guiding theme of twentieth-century Latin American history.

This image of progressive, reformist middle sectors, however, had already appeared in earlier writings by Latin Americans. In Colombia, for example,

⁴ Luis López de Meza, *La clase media en Colombia* (Bogotá: Banco de la República, 1932), 3. T. Lynn Smith presented the same point for Colombian middle class. See Lynn T. Smith, *Observations on Middle Class in Colombia* (Bogotá: Editorial MGB, 1950), 3-5. Both studies were published later in Luis López de Meza, *Tres estudios sobre la clase media en Colombia* (Bogotá: Banco de la República, 1952).

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

Richard Dolmatoff attempted to go beyond both the positivist and evolutionary approaches. In his 1953 article he sought to demonstrate how the middle class in Colombia played an important role in politics, economics, and social structures. The middle class was, according to Dolmatoff, the result of the urbanization, education, industrialization, and political democratization undergone during the first half of the twentieth century.⁶

These studies and the questions they raised, however, did not endure on the agendas of professional historians. By mid-1950s modernization theory predominated and came to inform most intellectual inquiries on the subject. As a result of the rise of United States as a superpower, and its fear of the spread of communism, the American government challenged social scientists to study “the third world” in order to promote economic development and political stability. Many sociologists, anthropologists, and historians spent their time looking at the differences between “modern” and “traditional” societies.⁷ Such studies, therefore, focused on determining how Latin American countries could overcome their “traditional” and “underdeveloped” values in order to become “modern,” prosperous, capitalistic, and democratic societies. In this context, the

⁶ Richard Dolmatoff, “Notas sobre la clase media en Colombia” in Luis López de Mesa, *Tres estudios de la clase media en Colombia* (Bogotá: Banco de la República, 1952), 60-69. Although Dolmatoff’s field of study was not the middle class, he suggested an agenda to understand middle class’s history.

⁷ For further analysis on these questions see Alvin Y. So, *Social Change and Development Modernization, Dependency and World-System Theories* (Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 1990).

middle class was charged with embodying modern values to achieve “modernization.”⁸

Modernization thinkers argued that if there were an authentic middle class, it would simultaneously deliver the modernization that Latin America countries needed and save them from succumbing to “communist values.”⁹

Modernization theory’s ahistorical conceptualizations of Latin America became all too apparent, however, when many countries began to undergo political and labor conflicts in which middle-class people played active roles. In Colombia, for example, *empleados*, white-collar workers, in both the private and the public sectors created their own labor organizations to represent themselves in political arena.¹⁰ These movements made many scholars think that the middle class in Latin America would not be able to embody democratic values to achieve

⁸ For Colombia see T. Lynn Smith, “Considerations on Colombia Middle Class” in Theo. R. Crevenna, *Materiales para la historia de la clase media en América Latina* (Washington: Unión Panamericana, 1952), V6, 1-14. See also Smith, *Colombia: Structure and the Process of the Development* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1967), 338-344; *The Race between Population and Food Supply in Latin America* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1976) and Smith, *Studies of Latin American Societies* (Garden City: Anchor Books, 1970). In most of these studies, Smith illustrates the different reasons why Colombia has not reached “modernization and modernity.” In essence, there was a middle class in Colombia, but it was not authentic.

⁹ W.W. Rostow, *The Stages of Economic Growth: A Non Communist Manifesto* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990). In Colombia a good example is Carlos Archin, *Clase media y el comunismo: una ayuda estratégica* (Bogotá: Editorial CCLR, 1978). I thank Oscar Calvo for helping me to find this text. Luisa Fuentes Muñoz, “The Middle Class and Democracy in Latin America” (P.h.D Diss., Stanford University, 1987).

¹⁰ During the d 1960s and 1970s *empleados* were important actors in the public arena. In 1961, for example, air hostess strikes, bank clerks’ protests and *empleado* labor unions came to be normal. In 1977, many *empleados* initiated the “paro nacional” held on 14 September. As a result, twenty labor unions were created in the *Cómite Intersindical de Trabajadores del Estado [CITE]*. See Daniel Pécaut, *Crónica de dos décadas políticas, 1968-1988* (México D.F: Siglo Ventiuno Editores, 1988); Medófilo Médina, *La protesta urbana en Colombia en el siglo XX* (Bogotá: Ediciones Aurora, 1984); Marco Palacios, *Entre la legitimidad y la violencia, Colombia 1875-1994* (Bogotá: Editorial Norma, 1995), 244-250; Suzanne Beall Wilson, “The Status Quo or the Politics of the Status Quo: The

“modernization,” or that the countries’ social conditions would not allow the middle class to grow. Consequently, “the lack of the middle class” was a main measure of the “backwardness” of Latin American countries because middle class people did not follow the historical model hypothesized by modernization theory. Then, scholars began to ask themselves: Can middle class history be studied if there is no middle class?¹¹

Both on the right and the left emerged a common, generally pessimistic interpretation. Some scholars argued that in Latin American countries it was impossible to find an “authentic middle class” because unlike the middle classes of Europe and United States Latin America’s one was characterized by the lack of an entrepreneurial spirit promoting consumption, independence from elite patronage, cultural autonomy, and proper political positions.¹²

Opponents of modernization theory did not assign an important role to the middle class either. Dependency thinkers introduced a dualistic assumption to explain Latin America societies. Although dependency theory overcame the positivist and social Darwinian presumptions to explain Latin America’s so-

Political Role of the Colombian Middle Class” (P.h.D., Diss., University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 1995).

¹¹ Perhaps this is one of the main reasons why I have been asked, “What middle class are you talking about? The reality, [some have said to me] will show you that there is no middle class in Latin America.” Michael Jiménez, in contrast, has called upon scholars to look at middle class people to understand the twentieth century in Latin America. See Michael Jiménez, “The Elision of the Middle Classes and Beyond: History, Politics, and Development Studies in Latin American’s ‘Short Twentieth Century’” in Jeremy Adelman, (ed) *Colonial Legacies: The Problem of Persistence in Latin American History* (New York and London: Routledge Press, 1999), 227.

¹² I am drawing on D. S. Parker, *The Idea of the Middle Class*, 3; and Gabriel Salazar, “Para una historia de la clase media en Chile in *Documento de trabajo* No. 60 (Santiago de Chile: Sur

called "backwardness," it focused principally on explaining the economic structures of dependency. Historians and scholars studied Latin American countries in relation to modern Europe countries and the U.S.A. In the global context of capitalism, these relationships assigned the region a dependent role to external capital. This specific role "forced" Latin America countries to keep their "underdeveloped" and "backward" characteristics. From a dependency perspective, consequently, the middle class people appeared only fleetingly as secondary historical actors. At best, the middle class was seen as a group doomed to undergo a proletarianization process similar to that of the working class because of Latin America's place in the world economy. This interpretation, in turn, was accompanied by the belief that the middle class was "suspect" as well as "dying." According to the dependency perspective, the middle class role is characterized as "the best class to maintain the political status quo."¹³ This approach's ahistorical conceptualizations surfaced, however, when *empleados* supported major strikes during the 1960s and 1970s in Colombia and throughout Latin America. Despite these historical circumstances, many scholars refused to recognize any political or social role played by the middle class. Specifically, historians read these strikes as a manifestation of the processes that, as noted, the middle class should undergo. The upper sectors of the middle class would enjoy incorporation into the upper classes; and the lower sectors of the middle class

Profesionales, Ltda, 1986), 40; and Bert Hoselitz, "El desarrollo económico de América Latina," *Desarrollo económico* 2 (October and December 1962): 49-65.

would suffer the proletarianization process, joining the ranks of the working class. There was, therefore, little need to study the middle class because it always tended to “disappear.”¹⁴

More recently, however, several scholars have incorporated middle-class history into their analyses and have tried to relate middle-class experiences to working-class identities. Nevertheless, many of these studies are more concerned with factory workers; the middle class tends to be seen as static “given.” Scholars have assigned and defined *a priori* values and characteristics to the middle class in contrast to the working class without profiling the middle class historically.¹⁵ Accordingly, historians have not explored white-collar

¹³Larissa Adler de Lomnitz, *Chile's Middle Class: A Struggle for Survival in the Face of Neoliberalism* (Boulder: L Rienner Publishers, 1991), 9-19.

¹⁴ Some examples are for Colombia, Nicolas Buenaventura, *La Proletarización de los profesionales y los sectores medios* (Bogotá: Ediciones Suramericana, CEIS, 1985); Rocio Londoño, *Sindicalismo y política económica* (Bogotá: FEDESARROLLO-CEREC, 1986). For Latin America see César Germaná, “The Middle Strata and the Problem of the Class Alliances, translated by Peggy Westwell, *Latin American Perspectives* 10, No 2-3, (1983): 171-184 ; Carlos Figueroa *Estratificación y movilidad ocupacional en América Latina* (Santiago de Chile: Cuadernos de la Cepal, No. 39, 1981), 6-64; Antonio García, “Las clases medias en América Latina: Hacia una teoría de la ambigüedad social” *Cuadernos Americanos* 60 (September-December 1968). Seminario sobre la clase media y el desarrollo en América Latina, *La clase media y el desarrollo de América Latina* (Santa Barbara, Costa Rica: Biblioteca Cedal, 1972); Marcelo Cavarozzi, *Populismo y partidos de clase media, notas comparativas* (Buenos Aires: CEDES, 1976).

¹⁵ Thomas Miller Klubock, *Contested Communities: Class, Gender, and Politics in Chile's El Teniente Copper Mine: 1904-1951* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998); and William French, *A Peaceful and Working-People: Manners, Morals, and Class Formation in Northern Mexico* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico, 1996). Although, French argues that both middle-class and working-class identities were constructed themselves reactively, that is, in relation to each other, the study pays attention to how the middle class tried to impose its values on working people. Those values are understood as homogeneous and *a priori*, they are assigned to middle class as a group. In the same sense, cultural history and subaltern studies, as Van Young has said, have tended to restore the voice from the people historically marginalized. However, “there is nothing particularly uncultural, as there is nothing particularly unsocial about plotting the history of the elite groups.” I would add there is nothing uncultural about analyzing the middle classes. Eric Van Young, “The New Cultural History Comes to Mexico” *Hispanic American Historical Review*, 79, 2 (May 1999): 219. Implicitly, I will attempt to understand *empleados'* identities, as a part of the middle classes, in economic and cultural terms. As Van Young has said, “cultural history and

workers, *empleados*, and clerical workers' history.¹⁶ As Brian Owensby has remarked, "social and political relations have come to be represented in terms of polar opposites: employers, workers; elite, masses; rich, poor; capital, labor; oppressors, oppressed."¹⁷ Historians' agendas for over thirty years have focused on the stories of peasants, workers, and the oppressed in their struggles against the elite. Supposedly, the middle class did not exist. It had no story to be told.¹⁸

economic history (or other sorts of quantitatively based history, for the matter) though most often thought separate from each other, or even antithetical, because of epistemological, methodological or boundary distinction, may be usefully united to benefit of each." Van Young, 213.

¹⁶ In Colombia, for example, there are many studies analyzing the factory workers' experiences. Those include: Luz Gabriela Arango, *Mujer, religión e industria, Fabricato, 1923-1982* (Medellin: Universidad Externado de Colombia and Universidad de Antioquia, 1991); Anita Weiss, *La empresa colombiana entre la tecnocracia y la participación, del taylorismo y la calidad total* (Santa Fe de Bogotá: Universidad Nacional de Colombia, 1995); Weiss, *Modernización industrial: empresa y trabajadores* (Santa Fe de Bogotá: Universidad Nacional de Colombia, 1997); Weiss and Wilberto Castañeda, *Estrategias empresariales y diferenciación obrera. Estudio de una empresa metalmeccánica* (Santa Fe de Bogotá: Universidad Nacional de Colombia, 1992); Rainer Dombois, *Trabajadores en el campo industrial, estudio de una empresa del sector automotriz* (Santa Fe de Bogotá: Universidad Nacional de Colombia, 1992); and Cármen Marina López and Gina Castellanos, *Arbitrariedad y benevolencia en el trabajo industrial, estudio de una empresa de alimentos* (Santa Fe de Bogotá: Universidad Nacional de Colombia, 1992). See also, Arango and Carmen Marina López, *Globalización, apertura económica y relaciones industriales en América Latina* (Santa Fe de Bogotá: Facultad de Ciencias Humanas, CES, 1999). There are, however, other analyses about middle class' historical role, see, Arango, Mara Viveros, Rosa Bernal, *Mujeres ejecutivas, dilemas comunes, alternativas individuales* (Santa Fe de Bogotá: Ediciones Uniandes, ECOE ediciones, 1995); Bernal, "Self, Family, and Work in the Lives of Colombian Professional Women" (P.h.D Diss., Harvard University, 1984); Abel Ricardo López, "Veinte años al servicio de la familia: relaciones laborales y de género en una empresa de servicios: Compensar 1978-1997" (Undergraduate thesis, Universidad Nacional de Colombia, 1999). Arango has remarked, therefore, that for the Colombian case "secretaries, *empleadas* and *empleados* still lack analysis or research." Arango, "La clase obrera tiene dos sexos: avances sobre los estudios latinoamericanos sobre género y trabajo" *Nomadas* 6 (March 1997): 91.

¹⁷ Brian Owensby, *Intimate Ironies: Modernity and the Making of the Middle Class Lives in Brazil* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 6. I have found Owensby useful in understanding the complexity of the middle class identities in Latin América.

¹⁸ There are some exceptions see, Owensby, *Intimate Ironies*; Parker, *The Idea of the Middle Class*; Jaime García Covarrubias, *El partido radical y la clase media en Chile: La relación de intereses entre 1888-1938* (Santiago: Editorial Andres Bello, 1990). Mexican writers have been especially prolific on this question. See Gabriel Carreaga, *Mitos y fantasías de la clase media en México* (México: Editorial J Moritz, 1974); Francisco López Cámara, *Apogeo y extención de la clase media mexicana* (Cuernavaca: Centro Regional de Investigaciones Multidisciplinarias, UNAM, 1990); Rami

This thesis, therefore, aims to address this historiographic gap to enrich labor, social, and cultural history in Colombia and Latin América. The main inquiry focuses on the multiple and diverse identities of those historical actors called *empleados* (such as bank clerks, government white-collar workers, cashiers, secretaries, receptionists) as a part of the urban middle class in Bogotá between 1930s and 1950s. Specifically, this study analyzes the symbolic strategies and material practices of *empleados* as they endeavored to distinguish themselves from both *obreros* and those above them.¹⁹ I attempt to see how people who considered themselves both *empleado* and middle class faced, perceived,

Schwartz and Salomo Bazbaz Lapidus, *El ocaso de la clase media* (México: Grupo Editorial Planeta, 1994); Calixto Contla, *La pequeña burguesía en la sociedad mexicana: 1895 a 1960* (México: UNAM, 1972); Soledad Loaeza, *Clases medias y política en México: La querrela escolar, 1959-1963* (México: El Colegio de México, 1988); Gonzalo Portocarrero Maisch, *Las clases medias - entre la pretensión y la incertidumbre* (Miraflores: OXFAM, 1998). For Colombia see, Herbert Braun, *The Assassination of Gaitan: Public Life and Urban Violence in Colombia* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985); and John Green, "Superior to their Leaders: Gaitanismo, Left Liberalism and Popular Mobilization in Colombia: 1928-1948" (working manuscript).

¹⁹ What is the middle class? Who belongs to the middle class? Are *empleados* necessarily in the middle-class spectrum? Is it a class? How can we look at the identities of a highly differentiated group? These questions are in the historian's agenda as an obstacle to historicize *empleados'* identities and by extension the middle class people's experiences. Labor historian E. P. Thompson remarked that class identity was the historical result of both the economic relation of productions and cultural models, but in execution, "there is a slippage when most historians discuss middle class; it is never clear which 'style' or occupational strata define identity." As Parker has pointed out, historians have tended to define class identity as a homogenous, concrete, coherent and unique category of conscious historical actors. From this perspective, class identity must be analyzed as a homogenous conglomerate in which historical actors have a single voice to be heard. In contrast, as Michael Jiménez has said, "the social historian of the middle classes in Latin América must begin by acknowledging their considerable fragmentation." For this very reason, I will study both the diversity and heterogeneity of *empleados* identities as a part of the middle class displayed by people who worked at banks, government agencies, and offices. Particularly, this thesis attempts to illuminate the Colombian middle class through the *empleados* case in order to elaborate the historical role of the middle class people during the twentieth century. Not surprisingly, a single study or approach cannot accomplish that attempt; on the contrary, it needs a mosaic of many "middle class histories" according to different agendas, purposes, and primary sources. See, Jiménez "The Elision of the Middle Classes," 217. See also, Rosemary Crompton, Fiona Devine, Mike Savage, and John Scott, *Renewing Class Analysis* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), 165-184.

struggled with, and understood the social order that was undergoing important historical changes, including the creation of new social relationships, new conceptions of work, urban growth, industrialization, and the expansion of the service sector.

The architecture of this interpretation is divided into three parts. The first chapter deals with the historical context, which forged the difference between *obrero* and *empleado*, and shows how a specific labor market for *empleados* emerged and shaped their identities as members of the middle class. In the second chapter I analyze how the “new” labor and gender relationships in the workplace marked *empleados*’ identities in relation to class. Finally, the third chapter aims to demonstrate how *empleados* identified themselves through their words, material actions, imaginations, cultural practices, and social assumptions in order to place themselves in a specific place in the social hierarchy. By using a diversity of primary sources - diaries, *empleado* handbooks, manuals, employment forms, historical statistics, government publications, personal archives, oral history and a set of novels - I attempt to look at how *empleado* constructed their identities through a combination of the historical structures and their daily life experiences.²⁰

²⁰ Michael de Certeau, *The Practice of the Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984); Alf Ludtke, *The History of Everyday Life, Reconstructing Historical Experiences and Ways of Life*, trans. by William Templer (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995). It is very important to note that the handbooks, in-house magazines and manuals used in this thesis were not published by any press. *Empleados* and *empleadas* nevertheless saw, read and wrote them as a source where they could “publish” their writings, stories, and thoughts. Formally, these sources

An inquiry into the nature of *empleados* as part of the middle class in Colombia between 1930 and 1950 will help us challenge many “historical myths in both the U.S and European historiographies whose historical agendas have focused on explaining why Latin America countries have not “modernized” or become dominant actors in the global market economy. This is not to devalue a global comparativist approach. The purpose, rather, is to explore an alternative perspective, a more complex one that values agency and highly differentiated middle class identities that have created, defined, and influenced the dynamism of urban centers in the social, political, and economic history of a de-ruralizing Colombia during the twentieth century. This thesis is an initial step forward analyzing the historical role played by the middle classes.

will be cited as unpublished sources, but analytically they will be used as the principal source

Chapter 1:

“We are looking for jobs as an *empleado*. We are *empleados* not *obreros*. There is a big difference.”²¹ *Empleados* spaces and the Creation of Middle- Class Identity.

Colombia underwent major historical changes during 1930s and 1950s. Industrialization, urbanization, and the growth of the public and private sectors allowed the emergence of a new social order. Specifically, these historical circumstances produced specific workspaces that structured several conceptualizations of being *empleado*, always in contrast to being *obrero*. Crucially, those structural differences contributed to *empleados* defining their middle class identity in relation to social status, gender, work values, and cultural constructions.

Introduction New Social Order: 1930-1950

The victory of Colombia’s Liberal Party in the presidential election of 1930 initiated a decade of reforms that accelerated the process of economic “modernization,” urbanization, and national integration that had begun earlier under Conservative regimes. These important changes crucially affected the ideas of society. After forty-three years of “Conservative Hegemony,” Liberals took control of the government and exercised reforms aimed at incorporating the “masses” of Colombians into national life.

where these historical actors communicated and exhibited their experiences.

The Conservative Party by the 1920s had sought to “modernize” and expand public education by giving an important role to the government in the educational process. During the presidency of Pedro Nel Ospina, for example, the Conservative Party invited foreign experts to help create a country that could follow models of the “developed world.” Consequently, the Colombian government adopted many of those recommendations which included creating a national public education infrastructure. In 1927 the Conservative government declared primary education mandatory and standardized the requirements for secondary studies.

Building on that nascent public education infrastructure, five years later Liberal president Enrique Olaya Herrera sanctioned a law requiring teachers to earn a baccalaureate; and in 1933, girls were “authorized” to go to the schools previously accessible only to boys. Liberals continued this reformist trend under Alfonso López Pumarejo, producing deep social changes.²² His so-called *Revolución en Marcha* (Revolution on the March) marked the emergence of a more activist and interventionist state, resembling Franklin Delanor Roosevelt’s “New Deal” in United States. During these years, however, Colombians felt the consequences of economic crisis and world depression. Responsively, the government instituted structural reforms (new taxes, and agrarian reforms) that redistributed wealth while putting the country on a sounder financial base.

²¹ Morales-Pino, *Los del medio*, 55

²² Aline Helg, *La educación en Colombia, 1918-1957: una historia social, económica y política* (Bogotá: Fondo Editorial CEREC, 1987), 114-115.

López also sought to open the political process to more people. Under his presidency, all adult males gained the unrestricted right to vote in the constitutional reform of 1936. (Women did not gain that right until 1957-1958.)

These changes gave an increasingly important role to workers. They gained the right to organize as members of unions, to bargain collectively, and to go on strike against employers in order to negotiate with them for better terms of employment. The constitution of 1936, moreover, allowed the Colombian state to assume responsibility for arbitrating all labor conflicts and to act as the final protector of the “public interest.”

In short, López gave new opportunities to the majority of Colombians.²³

Public education was an essential element in the Lopez reforms. One of the most important goals was to create a more literate, skilled, and productive work force that would allow Colombia to compete with other “modern capitalist nations.” During the late 1930s the government increased the budget for education. It created primary schools in rural areas in order to educate people in “modern values.” The hiring of additional teachers and the expansion of normal schools supported secondary education. These efforts created a system of national high schools (colegios) and established an official curriculum according

²³ Murray, *Dreams of Development*, 17-23; Marco Palacios, *Entre la legitimidad y la violencia, Colombia, 1875-1994* (Bogotá: Editorial Norma, 1999), 251-259; David Bushnell, *The Making of Modern Colombia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 181-201; Mauricio Archila, *Cultura e Identidad Obrera: Colombia, 1910-1945* (Bogotá: CINEP, 1991), 80-85, and John Green, “Superior to their Leaders,” 162-214.

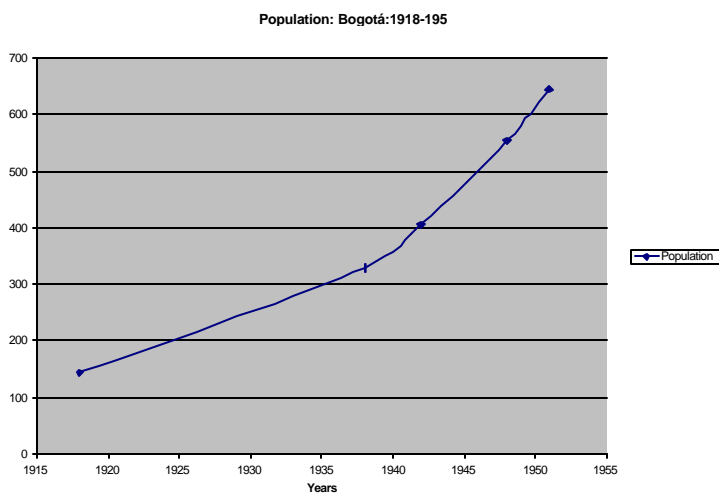
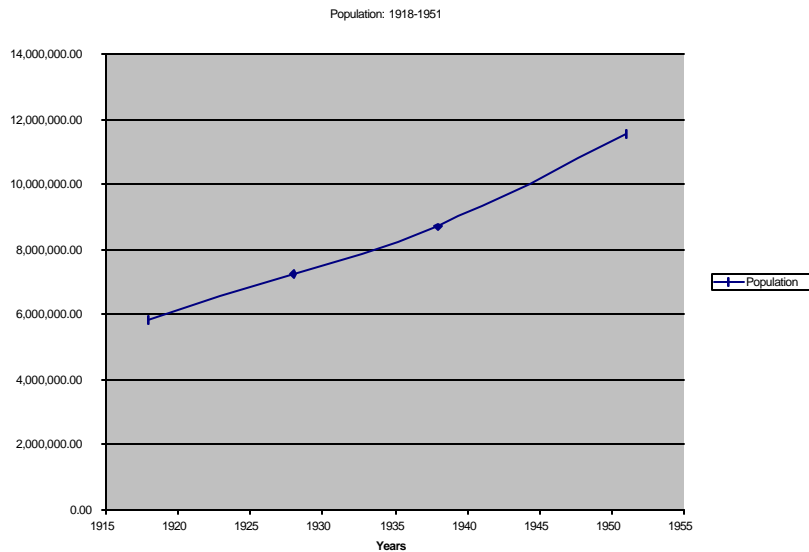
to specific guidelines for transforming Colombians into a “modern people.”²⁴ Large numbers of women and men benefited from government-sponsored education. Simultaneously, still competing for defining “values,” the Catholic Church created additional schools in order to counter the expansion of public schools. Essentially, López believed that one goal of education was to foster a sense of national unity and identity that could transcend racial, class, cultural, regional and partisan differences.

Economic growth, urbanization, and the rise of the private and public service sectors accompanied these educational changes. The country underwent rapid population growth. Between 1905 and 1935, the population growth rate stood at 1.25 percent per year; and between 1935 and 1964, growth rate increased to 2.4 percent. Colombia had 4,132,623 inhabitants in 1905; by 1912, 5,072,604; by 1918, 5,855,077; and by 1928 7,851,000.²⁵ By 1951, Colombia had 11,584,172 inhabitants. According to a recent study, urban population doubled between 1938 and 1951.²⁶ As tables 1 and 2 illustrate, Bogotá also underwent dramatic population growth. In 1918 Bogotá had 143,994 inhabitants; by 1951, this number had increased to 645,255. These new demographic trends in Bogotá and other cities in Colombia, consequently, began to transform Colombia from a rural

²⁴ Helg, *La educación en Colombia*, 125-130; Javier Saéñz Obregon, Oscar Saldarriaga, and Armando Ospina, *Mirar la infancia: pedagogía moral y modernidad en Colombia, 1903-1946* (Santa Fe de Bogotá: Colciencias, Uniandes, Universidad de Antioquia, 1997), 213-254.

²⁵ Contraloría General de la República, *Censo general de población, 1938* (Bogotá: Ediciones Contraloría, 1942), 54-57; Contraloría General de la República, *Primer censo industrial de Colombia, 1945* (Bogotá: Ediciones Contraloría, 1947), 76-77.

to an urban nation with all its concomitant transformations.



Tables 1 and 2: Population: 1930-1955

Source: Miguel Urrutia, *Compendio de estadísticas históricas de Colombia* (Bogotá: UNAL, 1970), 23-36; and Alberto Pardo, *Geografía económica de Colombia* (Bogotá: Editorial Tercer Mundo, 1972), 98-102.

These demographic processes were reflected in the expansion of the industrial and service sectors. Industries such as coffee processing, railroads, manufacturing, and construction accompanied population growth and

²⁶ Carmen Elisa Florez Nieto, *Las transformaciones sociodemográficas en Colombia durante el siglo XX* (Santa Fe de Bogotá: Banco de la República and Tercer Mundo Editores, 2000), 116-117.

urbanization. Even more dramatic, during the period 1930-1960, Colombia underwent the rapid growth of the service sector in commerce, government, and transport. This sector, specifically, expanded as a direct result of state growth, as the state became more interventionist. Table 3 illustrates the expansion of industrial and service sectors in relation to the decline of the agricultural sector.²⁷ These historical changes precipitated the creation of large numbers of factories and service enterprises, which became the people's workplaces.

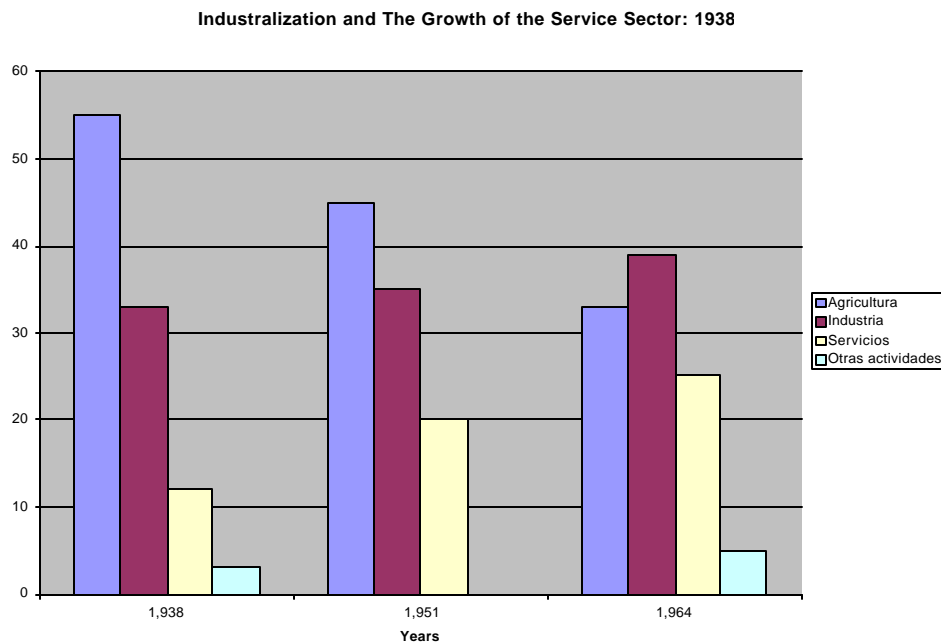


Table 3: Industrialization and growth of the service sector: 1938-1964

Source: Miguel Urrutia, *Compendio de estadísticas históricas de Colombia*, 23-36; and Alberto Pardo, *Geografía económica de Colombia*, 98-102. See also, Contraloría General de la República, *Primer censo industrial de Colombia, 1945* (Bogotá: Ediciones Contraloría, 1947.)

²⁷Ibid; Alberto Pardo, *Geografía económica y humana de Colombia* (Bogotá: Ediciones Tercer Mundo, 1972), 85- 87; and Contraloría General de la República, *Censos generales de Población* (Bogotá: Ediciones Contraloría, 1951), 43.

Characteristics of state intervention during the late 1930s and 1940s included government created banks and other new institutions to facilitate its new economic role. In 1923, for example, the Kemmerer Mission, sponsored by United States government, urged the creation of new monetary institutions. Following these recommendations the government established the *Banco de la República*, and the *Contraloría General de la República* and supported the creation of the banks and other service enterprises such as post offices, tax offices, ministries, and schools. These new institutions created new workplaces and new conceptualizations of work for the growing number of *empleados* who gained employment in the service sector. By 1940 the number of *empleados* was 1,234,456; their number increased to 4,567,987 by 1960. That growth was particularly clear in Bogotá. An article published in 1946 showed how the *empleado* service sector began growing during the late 1930s and 1940s. According to this article, the service sector represented the thirty-five percent of the Colombian population, importantly, forty-six percent were women.²⁸

Simultaneously to the historical circumstances that expanded the service sector and its work force, the factory workforce was expanding also.²⁹ Both processes created specific labor spaces for *empleados* to work in service enterprises and *obreros* to work in factories.

²⁸ Rafael Viera Moreno "Situación económica de las clases medias," *Mes Financiero Económico* 6, 7 (1946): 29-41.

²⁹ Jaramillo and Cuervo have remarked "The service sector must not be understood as an unimportant role, instead, it must be understood as a part of the whole industrialization and

Empleados Spaces: “Struggling for a job.”

The competitive labor market inhabited by *empleados* was a defining space where they not only struggled to get a job, but was also where *empleados* began to shape their emerging assumptions about what it meant to be an *empleado*, as a member of the middle class. The “*empleado* specific labor space,” as a contemporary put it, created specific social practices that *empleados* were expected to follow in order to be “someone in life and belong to the middle class.”³⁰

Significantly, this labor space was the place where *empleados* saw how social hierarchies, supported by the historical difference between service and industrial sectors, could be maintained to distinguish themselves from those below. *Empleados* sought, then, a job in the service sector because it gave them the possibility to improve their social status. As recruiters of additional service sector employees, they defined their places in the social hierarchy in contrast to the working class. *Empleados* also defined their work environment as competitive. As a classified job advertisement said:

Los trabajos que se ofrecen para los empleados y en general para la clase media están en el servicio. La diferencia empieza ahí. Los empleados debe enterarse de que los trabajos de servicios proveen una forma de vivir digna y respetable. Los trabajos en la oficina y en general en los servicios son diseñados para personas con alguna posición social, no los son para

urbanization process carried out during the twentieth century.” Luis Mauricio Cuervo and Samuel Jaramillo, *Urbanización latinoamericana* (Bogotá: ESCALA, 1993), 211.

³⁰ACGR, Box: Selección de Personal, Folder: 2, “Políticas de selección de empleados,” 45, 1940, typescript.

obreros quienes se pueden conformar con trabajos de su clase . . . por eso debemos ser estrictos en la selección de nuestro personal, cuidadosos en la historia laboral y sumamente cautelosos en el rango social al que pertenecen los candidatos.³¹

¿Quiéres ser diferente, inteligente y ser alguien importante socialmente?

¿Quiéres ganar dinero suficiente para vivir? Ven, participa y concursas para obtener el trabajo de jefe de sección de una importante empresa de servicios. La vida no es fácil, mide tus conocimientos y obten un trabajo de acuerdo con tus aspiraciones sociales, . . . dalé sentido a tu vida de empleado.”³²

The middle class artifacts reflected their hierarchical and competitive social reality.³³ In the outline of an unpublished play, for example, José Antonio Osorio-Lizarazo showed how *empleados* struggled to obtain a job that would ensure them middle-class status. In one passage, there were three job seekers who desired “to be *empleados* and work in a office to open up possibilities for the future.”³⁴ One day as these job seekers waited to be interviewed, they compared letters of recommendation, expressed their fears about not being accepted, and explored the qualities that could best help them obtain the job. Letters of recommendation, labor experience, “intelligence,” and some educational background, it became clear, were keys to accessing office work. Although the reader does not know who finally obtained the job, the play showed how this

³¹ ACGR, Box: 11, Folder: A13, “Estudio psicológico para los empleados de la Contraloría,” 27, 1946, typescript.

³² Bogotá, *Guía del Comercio* (Bogotá: 1941-1943), 23.

³³AJAOL, Box: Inéditos, Folder: 24, “Diario de un empleado público,” 32, 1942, typescript.

process of hiring started to become common during the late 1940s and 1950s. To be involved in this process meant the possibility to getting a “decent and adequate job” and to improve one’s social status. Yet, as the play made clear, this hiring process itself “was not easy. To find someone who was a hard worker could take all day” because “it was as though they wanted to hire a manager.”³⁵

The job seekers in Osorio-Lizarazo’s play represented only a few among tens of thousands of people struggling to enter in the labor force. Bank and commercial clerks, public functionaries, and *empleados* in general all experienced and complained of the “extraordinary” intensification of the struggle of looking for a job according to “their social status.” Education came to be more important than ever before; and both government organizations and private enterprises instituted competitive examinations in order to hire “the right people, the right *empleados*, hardworkers, skilled, intelligent, and morally devoted *empleados*.”³⁶

Even though these competitive examinations became increasingly common during the late 1940s and 1950s, the *carta de recomendación* (letter of recommendation) continued to be of crucial importance; and what is more, it was institutionalized in the application process. While one may argue that letters of recommendation and standardized tests were incompatible, the letters reflected the continuing significance of personal relationships in the new competitive labor market. *Empleados* had to both find a connection to obtain a letter of

³⁴ Aristides Pérez, *Los empleados en el trabajo* (Bogotá: Editorial ABC, 1941), 34.

³⁵ AJAOL, Box: Inéditos, Folder: 0-28, “Escala invisibel,” 56, 1942, typescript.

recommendation and take a test in order to be evaluated as an *empleado*. This meant that despite the attempts at “standardization,” patronage was still crucial in the process of hiring.

In the new competitive labor spaces, potential *empleados* had to look for someone “important and well known”³⁷ who might have connections with both bosses and the people who would be in charge to make hiring decisions. Importantly, those connections and personal links were measured according to political positions in the public sector. *Empleados* had to know who the boss was, who his friends were, and to which political party he belonged. As one letter reflecting the patronage dynamic written in 1941 illustrated:

. . . gustoso lo recomendaría, pero no caigo en cuenta de qué amigos tengo yo allá para hacerlo. Los varios buenos amigos que trabajamos en la campaña pasada de quienes podría valerme para tal objeto, no se hayan actualmente aquí.³⁸

One public *empleado* in his diary referred to the patronage system as *la cuestión de la palanca* (the question of whom you know). Many government positions were selected according to the “favors due among friends.” It meant that the letter of recommendation was in some cases a formal requirement to obtain a job and that bosses had to respond favorably to letters from well-

³⁶ACGR, Box: Selección de personal, Folder: 2, “Políticas de selección de empleados,” 52, 1940, typescript.

³⁷AJAOL, *Diario de un empleado público*, 67.

³⁸AJAOL, Box: Trabajo Asalariado, Folder: 43, “Ricardo Daza to José Antonio Osorio Lizarazo: Letter of recommendation,” 31 August, 1941, Bogotá, typescript. It is important to note that in the government organizations and private enterprise, 100 percent of the curriculum vitae reviewed had letters of recommendation.

connected friends. José Antonio Osorio-Lizarazo underscored this point, showing how a new boss had to:

. . . ubicar nuevos empleados en la oficina y devolviendo favores a sus amigos a cuesta de nuevos puestos. Favores que debía desde hace mucho tiempo. Entonces, señorita, [secretaria] necesito colocar uno, dos o tres amigos. Me hace el favor de averiguarme dónde.³⁹

The patronage dimension did not make seeking a job easier. On the contrary, patronage made it more competitive. *Empleados* had to find personal connections, to seek out a patron to help them in the labor market in which seeking patronage became a strategy for being able to find a respectable job. This process consisted of finding someone important to write a letter describing the applicant's moral qualities, family background, and personal skills. As illustrated by a letter written for Carlos Fandiño:

. . . conozco a Carlos Fandiño desde hace muchos años, lo mismo que a su familia por lo cual puedo decir que se trata de una persona inteligente, de excelente conducta, respetuoso, honrado y merecedor de toda su confianza. Carlos desea vincularse a la Contraloría y yo te agradecería si me colaboraras, podría desempeñar un cargo medio pues trabajó intensamente en la campaña pasada.⁴⁰

Osorio-Lizarazo noted that the poor soul also had to “pray that [his] my co-applicants have not been able to find a more important person to write their

³⁹ AJAOL, Box: Ineditos, Folder: 28 “Escala invisible,” 34, 1942, typescript.

⁴⁰ APB, Box: Hojas de Vida, Folder: 43, “carta de recomendación by Carlos Pedraza,” 15 February, 1939, typescript.

letters of recommendation,”⁴¹ because he was running the risk to not obtain the job.

Letters of recommendation, however, were not the only potential preoccupation for *empleados*. As many novels and diaries described in late 1940s and 1950s, the competitive examination and its requirements were very important for securing office work in both the public and private sectors. These competitive requirements made the *empleados* perceive the struggle for “respectable, nonmanual work” as a question of “life or death.”⁴²

In efforts to counter the potentially negative effects of a political rather than economic agenda, the private sector began employing other types of tests. Those tests became as a measure of the *empleados* “skills, abilities, intelligence, mental capacity, mental age, morality, and spirit.”⁴³ Many *empleados* had to take “intelligence tests” along with mathematical, grammatical, language usage, reading, and analytical exams.⁴⁴ Although these tests became more common in the private sector, government departments became also interested in the goal of overcoming “patronage” and in creating a labor market based on merit. In addition, both private and public workplaces instituted the “personal interview”

⁴¹ AJAOL, “Escala invisible,” 73.

⁴² APB, Box: Varios, Folder: 34, “¿Quiénes son los buenos empleados?” 42, 1942, typescript.

⁴³ ACCR, Box: Selección de personal, Folder: 2, “Políticas de selección de empleados,” 35, 1940, typescript. These tests were initiated after 1939 with the *ley del empleado* and the possibility of creating the *carrera administrativa*. See Ernesto Herrnstandt, *Derecho de los empleados: La carrera administrativa* (Bogotá: Editorial Ferrine, 1939).

⁴⁴ Some examples can be useful. The exams asked questions such as, “Where is London? and ¿Where is Pasto? Analytical questions Roberto is taller than Fernando; Luis is taller than Roberto, therefore, Fernando is taller than Luis. True or false?” Surprisingly, the results are categorized as

in which *empleados* had to show “their social status, their values, their job aspirations, their family relationships, and their personal skills.”⁴⁵

The multiple elements involved in securing a job as an *empleado* made *empleados* think that just taking the test and “suffering this process”⁴⁶ would provide the key not only to success in life (because they could get the job), but also the key to distinguishing them from the “lower classes.” While letters of recommendation, tests, and interviews can be read as ways to control the labor spaces, high level *empleados* evaluated those elements involving them in a competitive arena in which personal characteristics, cultural patterns, social assumptions, and moral and family ideals shaped their definition of belonging to the middle class.

Hiring “*empleados de clase media.*”

The characteristics of the labor spaces dictated not only requirements for getting a job in the service sector, but through these requirements also created new social ideas and cultural distinctions between those who found jobs in the service sector and those who did not. By reading texts, exams, and interviews, one may decipher the structural constraints on becoming “*empleado de clase*

follow: “Genius, *empleado*, inept and *obrero.*” ACGR, Box: Selección de personal, Folder: 2, “Políticas de selección de empleados,” 67, 1940, typescript.

⁴⁵ ACGR, Box: Selección de personal, Folder: 2, “Políticas de selección de empleados,” 1940, typescript. We can place these interviews and tests as part of the process of scientific administration. Further analysis on this issue, see, Stephen Barley and Gideon Kunda, “Plan y dedicación, oleadas ideológicas de control normativo y racional en el discurso administrativo” trans. by Hernando Garcia Bustos *Innovar: Revista de Ciencias Administrativas y Sociales* 5 (July-December 1995): 2-35.

⁴⁶ APB, Box: Varios, Folder: 34, “¿Quiénes son los buenos empleados?” 45.

media.” Those constraints - age, gender, marital status, race - conformed to a social conception of middle class.

The age of the job seeker was a sign to distinguish “*empleados de clase media*” from “other types of work and social status.”⁴⁷ Women, for example, should be hired between twenty-four and thirty-two years of age. That specific range of age was believed to be ideal for hiring “*empleadas*, secretaries and receptionists,” because women’s personal preoccupation, as an *empleada*, (if she was not at home,) was “to obtain a job, and develop a professional career.”⁴⁸ In contrast, men were to be hired between twenty-six and thirty-four years of age because they “were in a crucial period of their lives to create a family.” It made them “people interested in the jobs, and personal progress.” The job was “the way they could support their families.”⁴⁹

For many employers, marital status was a crucial element in the selection of *empleados*. In 1936 for example, thirteen of fifteen women were single at the time they entered the enterprise.⁵⁰ In the following years this preference increased among employers. In 1943, for example, 85 percent of the women hired were single. In contrast, men were hired married. These criteria responded to specific constructions of the ideal family. The main reason to hire single women was the assumption that modern society could loosen the morals of

⁴⁷ACGR, Box: 23, Folder: L16, “Informes de selección de empleados,” 23, 1940, typescript.

⁴⁸ACGR, Box: 21, Folder: S31, “Informes de selección de empleados,” 43, 1941, typescript.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 56.

⁵⁰ This statistic information is the product of reading the *empleados*’ curriculum vitae during 1930-1950 in *Contraloría General de la República*, and *Personería de Bogotá*.

empleadas who were married, threading the construction of a middle class family.

One *informe de selección* described the *empleados'* family in order to warn of the risks of hiring women in general, and married women in particular,

La familia de un verdadero empleado es aquella que está gobernada por Dios. Desafortunadamente esta familia está en nuestro tiempo miserablemente trastornada. La esposa y la mujer en general está siendo sacada del mundo familiar para lanzarla a ese mundo indiferente de la oficina, en el que la familia se unde, la feminidad se pierde y las mujeres se tientan por el dinero.⁵¹

In brief, hiring married women would undermine the patriarchal structures of the family. The increased incorporation of women into the service labor market could create “*empleados'* homes without mothers.” According to the policies followed in both government and the private sector, the *empleado* and his middle-class home should resist the penetrations of such modernism. Women should remain firm guardians of the family traditions and the central pillar of the home.

The patriarchal model of the family was a class-specific notion.⁵² Among the lower classes women (*obreras*) were expected to work; and in the working class labor market in factories, employers were glad to hire women.⁵³ However, in the decent family of the *empleados*, women were expected to work in the home, taking care of their children and their husbands. Hiring polices advised: if you wanted a job as an *empleado*, you had to be single; married women should not

⁵¹AGCR, Box: 21, Folder: L31, “*Informes de selección de empleados*,” 46, 1942, typescript.

⁵² In the final chapter, we will see how *empleados* shaped these conceptions in order to be distinguished from those below.

“exercise paid employment outside the home” because “in the proletarian classes the whole family usually worked.”⁵⁴ Indeed, if married women worked, their jobs might undermine the *empleado* status of their husbands.

. . . el trabajo de la mujer casada y con hijos es deplorable para la familia. No podemos concebir a nuestras mujeres casadas y con hijos trabajando, como tantas familias obreras han hecho por mucho tiempo, abandonando sus verdaderas responsabilidades, dejando sus deberes durante su ausencia, resultando miserable su hogar por falta de cuidados . . . la madre ha constituido el fuego del hogar, el centro que reúne las miradas de los que forman la familia, a su calor se congregan en las tardes el empleado y sus hijos y ella mantiene lista la ración del día, da vida al hogar, lo mantiene, vive en él y protege su clase social.⁵⁵

That married woman protected the social class of the *empleado* was accompanied by the idea that middle class values should be taught generation to generation in order to maintain the “middle-class status” of *empleado*. While in the working class “daughters would abandon the home, spending their time working and having fun in unknown workplaces,”⁵⁶ *empleados’* wives, in contrast, should instruct their daughters in the duty of keeping the family. They should “practice” household work and domestic tasks in order to teach their *empleado* daughters how to be excellent mothers and wives. This would make our middle class women better.⁵⁷

⁵³ Ann Farnsworth-Alvear has shown similar points for Medellín, Colombia *Dulcinea in the Factory: Myths, Morals, Men and Women in Colombia’s Industrial Experiment, 1905-1960* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000).

⁵⁴AGCR, Box: 21, Folder: L31, “Informes de selección de empleados,” 58, 1942, typescript.

⁵⁵APB, Box: 11, Folder: L 34, “Selección de personal,” 17, 1941, typescript.

⁵⁶ACGR, Box: 14, Folder: D45, “La mujer trabajadora, la esposa del empleado,” 43, 1946, typescript.

⁵⁷*Ibid.*, 76.

Both public and private employers justified middle class gender roles based on patriarchal models. Mothers, it was argued, were more apt to suffer from psychological and physical illnesses. Employers asserted that “scientific studies” proved that married women were “less productive” because of their marital status. According to one study published in 1946, married women produced less than single women because:

. . . se ha demostrado científicamente que las mujeres casadas producen menos que las solteras y son más propensas a enfermarse, porque entre las mujeres casadas que trabajan, la incidencia de las enfermedades del corazón aumentan en la misma medida del número de hijos. Así el ser ama de casa no incide en las enfermedades pero si aumenta con el número de hijos . . . además las mujeres casadas son más propensas a problemas físicos y psicológicos, dolores de cabeza, lo que sugiere que las mujeres casadas sufren tres veces más de esta cuestión que las mujeres solteras. Las mujeres tienden a sufrir de insomnio, presión psicológica, cansancio, irritación, ansiedad, tensión, frustración, enojo y depresión.⁵⁸

With a deep faith in these “scientific studies,” many governmental organizations and private enterprises tried to hire single women in order to avoid “these women’s problems.”⁵⁹ These assumptions influenced not only the new competitive labor spaces but also the image of the proper *empleado* wife or middle class woman.

Such gender conceptualizations culturally justified what roles middle-class women could and could not assume. Consequently, the preference for hiring single women fit closely with the practice of hiring married man. The reasons can be found, again, in the idea that if married *empleados* were hired,

⁵⁸ Ibid.

their families would be able to maintain “the middle- class status.” In such families the *empleado* could work as a breadwinner, and wives could avoid the danger of going “to find a job in an unknown place.”⁶⁰ Such attitudes integrated into practice reinforced the patriarchal family. If the man worked, there was the possibility of improving social status, as well as symbolizing progress and culture. Again, this progress was measured in terms of class. If women did not have to work and only men did, *empleados*’ families could see themselves as middle class and be distinguished from the working class families. As a advertisement for a non-manual labor job put it:

. . . necesitamos un empleado que sea el mejor trabajador, el mejor padre y el mejor empleado, que su esposa sea la verdadera madre, la fiel guardiana atenta, el alma constante del hogar, que este siempre presente, necesitamos empleados que nos ayuden a superar tanta proliferación de mujeres trabajadoras como ocurre en nuestra pobre clase obrera. Necesitamos empleados que insistan en el papel materno de las mujeres para mantener nuestra herencia, nuestras costumbres, nuestra posición. Necesitamos empleados que vivan moderadamente con la mujer e hijos y los sostenga, eso son los empleados que se buscan por do quier.⁶¹

Gendered roles were widespread in the labor market and *empleados* were evaluated according to them. Reflecting patriarchal values, tests and interviews focused on evaluating not only the labor skills in general but also the degree to which *empleado* qualified as “*empleados de clase media*.” In general, private

⁵⁹ Marina Sanchez Pedraza, *¿Debe la mujer de clase media trabajar?* (Bogotá: Editorial UCBV, 1943), 54.

⁶⁰ Contraloría General de la República, *El hombre trabaja, la mujer sostiene* (Bogotá: Ediciones Contraloría, 1946), 31.

⁶¹ Bogotá, *Guía de Comercio*, (1941-1943), 34.

enterprises and government agencies wanted to know whether an applicant's family, personal, and labor background conformed to ideal middle class model. Specifically, employers tended to hire those who were totally independent of the extended family and those who were used to the role of breadwinner. According to the labor market criteria, these characteristics would help create *empleados* who would love their jobs and would give proper attention to their families. Employers stressed the idea that "they were hiring *empleados* and not obreros."⁶² As a psychological study published in 1948 said:

Los traumas en el trabajo son producto de los problemas psicológicos que tienen los trabajadores en el trabajo. Nosotros debemos contratar empleados sanos mentalmente que respeten las situaciones en el trabajo, necesitamos contratar personal apto, sin problemas psicológicos, con infancias terribles, sin padres, ni madres, porque la consecuencia es tener empleados pocos sumisos e irrespetuosos . . . esas personas pueden ser contratadas en fábricas e industrias, pero no en donde el servicio es lo importante, no es más que un alto riesgo. Nuestros empleados no son obreros o pobres, nuestros empleados son personas aptas quienes en sus relaciones familiares les han enseñado a manejar el trabajo como lo más importante de la vida."⁶³

Personal appearance also made the "difference between *obreros* and *empleados*."⁶⁴ Indeed, personal presentation was also essential to being classified as an *empleado*. They were expected to wear long sleeve shirts and ties, presentable shoes, and sensible hairstyles. Government agencies, private

⁶² ACCGR, Box: Selección de personal, Folder: 2, "Políticas de selección de empleados," 78, 1949, typescript.

⁶³ Contraloría General de la República, *Estudio sobre el obrero y el empleado de la clase media, diferencias psicológicas* (Bogotá: Ediciones Contraloría, 1946), 55.

⁶⁴ ACCGR, Box: Selección de personal, Folder: 2, "Políticas de selección de empleados," 34, 1940, typescript.

companies, and even *empleados* themselves thought that in the personal interview “attire was the most important element in getting an *empleado* job.”⁶⁵ *Exámenes de selección* focused on the way potential *empleados* dressed at the interview.

Fashion sense in this regard was an important class indicator of “who is *obrero* and who is *empleado*, who wants to work in an office and who can work in factories.”⁶⁶ One candidate was rejected because the way he dressed “. . . was disgusting, with a long beard, questionable hairstyle, and dirty.”⁶⁷ Those characteristics made him suitable “to work at a factory where being dirty was less important.” In contrast, another candidate was accepted because, “he dressed in excellent shoes, with a shirt that went perfectly with his pants. His hands, nails, and head were quite clean.” These characteristics would enable him to fit in well with the clean and quiet atmosphere of the office.⁶⁸

Although the patriarchal structures defined women as in charge at home, that did not mean that they could not work. Indeed, they played an important role in maintaining the *empleado* labor market. And like men, women were judged by their physical characteristics. In fact, personnel documents stressed that women’s bodily features would indicate whether or not they were “truthfully *empleadas*.” As a document remarked in 1951,

⁶⁵ACGR, Box: Selección de personal, Folder: 7, “Informes confidenciales de selección de empleados,” 67, 1950, typescript.

⁶⁶ACGR, Box: Selección de personal, Folder: 7, “Informes confidenciales de selección de empleados,” 43, 1940, typescript.

⁶⁷ACGR, Box: Selección de personal, Folder: 7, “Informes confidenciales de selección” 67, 1941, typescript.

Las características físicas de la mujer le permiten desempeñar trabajos en los cuales se necesite estar gran parte del tiempo laboral sentadas, contestando llamadas y pendiente de las necesidades de su jefes. Su anatomía la hace apta para estas tareas, de atención a la gente, pues muchas veces la belleza física atrae clientela y el servicio mejora radicalmente.⁶⁹

In addition to being attractive, women who were able to work as *empleadas* should be “submissive to their bosses, honest, tidy, and women who always would do their jobs.”⁷⁰ *Obreras* without any responsibilities within their families were often thought of as “aggressive, lazy,” and not proven “to adapt to the rules.”⁷¹ The difference between *obreras* and *empleadas* was based on the qualities that women from the middle class should exhibit. More important was the idea that “office jobs in the service sector” were the ideal jobs for an *empleada* “to be seen as a truthfully middle-class woman” and avoid the risk of being associated with those women “who work in factories.”⁷²

The middle-class *empleada* came to be associated with “service” jobs because, it was believed, they showed the proper attributes. Service work - serving people and giving attention to clients - and work as secretary, nurse, or receptionist were understood as a jobs well suited to women because, “if they were truly women, they would be good at service, they would have maternal

⁶⁸ACGR, Box: Selección de personal, Folder: 6, “Informes confidenciales de selección,” 67, 1940, typescript.

⁶⁹ ACGR, Box: Selección de personal, Folder: 16, “Evaluación de méritos,” 12, 1942, typescript.

⁷⁰ ACGR, Box: Selección de personal, Folder: 7, “Informes confidenciales de selección,” 21, 1940, typescript.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 56.

⁷²ACGR, Box: Selección de personal, Folder: 2, “Políticas de selección de empleados,” 32, 1940, 32, typescript.

feelings, they would have patience to deal with the service. Those characteristics made women excellent *empleadas*.”⁷³ Consequently, *empleadas* were associated culturally with their physical as well as class attributes. According to these assumptions, the body and the femininity of “*empleadas* were absolutely different from [those of] *obreras*.”⁷⁴ This difference made them the ideal persons for service jobs.

Even for women with significant education, and they had to have it to get a service job, different class and gender perceptions shaped their access to new labor spaces.⁷⁵ “To be pretty, to have beautiful body”⁷⁶ was advantageous for finding work in the service sector because these characteristics, it was believed, “were very difficult to find in working class women.”⁷⁷ Women, nevertheless, shaped these gender constructions in the workplace and at home creating their own identities in relation to work, class status, and gender.

Obrero and Empleado: Creating a Historical Distinction.

The competitive labor market itself produced not only a specific space where *empleados* and *empleadas* experienced the tensions between merit and patronage in the struggle to be someone in life, but also a space in which different ideals, perceptions, and assumptions about being *empleados* emerged,

⁷³ACGR, Box: Selección de personal, Folder: 2, “Exámenes de selección de empleados,” 55, 1940, typescript.

⁷⁴ACGR, Box: Selección de personal, Folder: 17, “Evaluación de méritos,” 59, 1940, typescript.

⁷⁵ The review of the curriculum vitae showed how by 1949, 100 percent of the women had primary education; 67 percent had secondary education; and 33 percent post secondary studies in commercial schools, mecanography, receptionist, etc.

⁷⁶ACGR, Box: Selección de personal, Folder: 15, “Evaluación de méritos,” 65, 1940, typescript.

allowing them to be distinguish themselves from those below. Taken together, these assumptions and ideas demonstrated a clear distinction between manual work, associated with *obreros* (workers), and non-manual work, associated with *empleados* (white-collar workers). This evolving distinction helped shape *empleados*' identities and their sense of belonging to the middle class.⁷⁸

As early as 1936, the *ley del empleado* carefully distinguished between manual and non-manual jobs.⁷⁹ An *empleado* was defined as a “person who develops and exercises mental and intelligent work.” *Empleado* was distinguished from the *obrero*, even when they had the same salary because “it does not matter the salary, but it does matter the quality of the people.”⁸⁰ These differences not only influenced labor law, but also helped shape ideas of social hierarchy.

Empleado publications constantly reinforced two the binary pillars of the social distinction between manual-nonmanual jobs, and between *obreros* and *empleados*.

In a white-collar handbook published in 1942, for example, this difference was associated with the place where workers worked. According to this study, the “first requirement” to be *empleado* was to work at the very least in an office environment which necessitated “special skills and where it was peaceful and quiet.” To work at an office meant to “work with the head” in contrast to *obrero*

⁷⁷ ACGR, Box: Escritos, Folder: 22, “La secretaria y la obrera,” 17, 1940, typescript.

⁷⁸ Parker has showed similar points for Peruvian case. See, Parker, *The Idea of The Middle Class*, 96-133.

⁷⁹ It seems extraordinary that the labor minister received many letters asking what were the differences between *obrero* and *empleado*. These questions were not only concerned with legal requirements but also as a way to define a social hierarchy between these two types of jobs.

jobs which were associated with working with one's hands. Simply put, nonmanual jobs involved "mental" rather than "muscular" exercise. Importantly, *empleados* utilized such class discourses. *Empleados* insisted on being "intellectual workers, civilized, with culture, good manners, and so forth" whereas the *obrero* was, according to *empleados*, "illiterate, poorly educated, less intelligent, lacking in good manners."⁸¹ *Empleados* perceived that having different and specific skills to deploy in office jobs as a crucial difference that distinguished them from the working classes. In a study published in 1943, one author attempted to demonstrate how *empleados* were completely different from *obreros* because of the skills they employed. The *empleado*, as a part of the middle class, had "intelligence, spirit, a sense of responsibility and patience, loyalty, a desire to be honest, and good will;"⁸² the *obrero*, as a member of the working class, "completely lacked education, and was lazy, irresponsible, unstable, and given to alcoholism and materialism."⁸³

Empleados, moreover, insisted that they were different from *obreros* because they did not just work, but they "served people, service was the most important characteristic of being an *empleado*."⁸⁴ To serve was important, according to *empleado* publications, because service was something one really

⁸⁰ Román Pérez Hernández, *Codificación del trabajo: manual del empleado, manual del obrero, manual del patron*, (Bogotá: Editorial Minerva, 1934.); and Colombia, *Ley del empleado* (Bogotá: Editorial Minerva, 1936), 7.

⁸¹ Contraloría General de la República, *Cartilla de empleados* (Bogotá: Ediciones Contraloría, 1942), 15.

⁸² Personería de Bogotá, *Los empleados* (Bogotá: Ediciones Personería, 1943), 37.

⁸³ *Ibid.*

wanted to do, and not something that one had to do, as in the *obreros'* case. As a white-collar handbook remarked in 1942:

En nuestra sociedad hay aquellos que trabajan con las manos, preparados para lidiar y embrutecerse con las cosas materiales en el trabajo. Hay otros que estan prestos a dar un servicio, siempre preparados mentalmente para servir, para relacionarse con la gente, para ayudar. La diferencia esta, entonces, en servir, en brindar ayuda. La gente sirve, los obreros trabajan con cosas materiales e inertas.⁸⁵

People served, workers labored. Middle class *empleados* did not just distinguish between themselves and the laboring classes based on the nature of their works; they also distinguished between themselves and the laboring class based on their distance from the means of production. *Empleados* understood their jobs as a professional service, and not as mere work, because, according to them, “they were not in contact with the means of production.”⁸⁶ They “were not working, but providing a service.”⁸⁷ *Empleados* argued that *obreros* usually had to be in contact with means of production and that meant they were being exploited. Consequently, *empleados* complained that their work, in contrast to that of the *obreros*, was not a way to be exploited. Instead, it was a privilege “to be someone in life.”⁸⁸

⁸⁴ Archivo de Carulla, Box: Certificaciones, Folder: 32-45, “Nosotros servimos,” 2, 1943, typescript. (Hereafter: AC)

⁸⁵ AC, Box: Certificaciones, Folder: 56-78, “Nosotros servimos,” 2, 1942, typescript; and AC, Box: Certificaciones; Folder: 12-17, “No trabajamos, servimos,” 2, 1945, typescript.

⁸⁶ AC Box: Comunicaciones, Folder: 56-79, “No trabajamos, servimos,” 21, 1945, typescript

⁸⁷ AC, Box: Comunicaciones, Folder: 32-37, “No trabajamos, servimos,” 12, 1945, typescript.

⁸⁸ In future research we should see how for the Colombian case these different perceptions of the work were in contrast to the *empleados* labor unions, which followed the idea that they also “were

A in-house magazine published in 1942 demonstrated how this new conception of the work was taking shape. It depicted the life of two brothers, Luis and Tomás. Luis was a hard-worker, and an *empleado*, while Tomás was a lazy *obrero*. Consequently, Luis loved his job, serving people, whereas Tomás had to work, but he did not want to. In one passage, Luis was making plans for a “municipal pipeline which will help people live better,” and some *obreros* were looking at and laughing at him because “he was doing his job outside of the workplace.” He answered them, “. . . the job is a gift, you can laugh at me right now, but my work is to serve people, to help them.” Indeed, to serve people was not a “dishonor, dishonor was to work as a *obreros* without any relation to people.”⁸⁹

Empleados thought that to work helping people one had to have “special characteristics.” These were associated with the idea that people in such jobs had to reflect “Christian values.” *Empleados* argued that if they wanted to be different from *obreros*, they would have to follow a more spiritual path. In this context, the *obrero* was associated with “materialism” while *empleado* was associated with “humanism.” To *empleados*, the *obreros* and their jobs sought to satisfy:

. . . necesidades fisiológicas básicas como la comida, la ropa, el sexo, sólo por el descanso y el dinero . . . Los deseos de encontrar un salario satisfacen las necesidades básicas, las condiciones mínimas para vivir, la búsqueda permanente de satisfacción material y no espiritual, no como lo

being exploited in the workplace.” See, J.M. Quintana Pereyra *La Redención de la Clase Media* (Bogotá: Editorial ABC, 1936); Green, “Superior to their Leaders,” 240-258.

⁸⁹ Contraloría General de la República, *Cartilla de empleados*, 19.

que provee nuestros trabajos que sirven, engrandecen el espíritu. Vivimos no sobrevivimos. Eso nos llevará al reinos de los cielos.⁹⁰

This text shows how *empleados* embraced the concept that their jobs promised spiritual redemption. Indeed, there was a “spiritual satisfaction, which was only an outcome of working and having contact with the “right people.”

Racial ideals were also embedded in the process of defining the middle class, “the right people.” In the story of the Luis and Tomás, being someone in life, and being *empleado* was closely associated with the issue of race. Although they were brothers, Luis, the *empleado*, appeared well-dressed, had white skin, and was described as “of good appearance, mannerly in speech and comportment”⁹¹ Tomás, on the other hand, had identifiably indigenous facial features. Indeed, Tomás’s problems of drinking or unemployment were associated, first, with being *obrero* and, second, with a “biological heritage.” Luis’ problems, in turn, were understood as just part of “life.”⁹² When they went to seek jobs, their “racial legacy” came to play an important role. Tomás’s indigenous features were the reason he had “to be content with working in a factory.” Yet, Luis “with his white skin, good appearance, and good energy in his blood” was able to “find an excellent job in a municipal office.”⁹³ In short, *empleados* thought that race and supposed biological characteristics were key

⁹⁰ ACGR, Box: Reconocimientos, Folder: 31, “El servir,” 34, 1945, typescript.

⁹¹ Contraloría General de la República, *Cartilla de empleados*, 24.

⁹² *Ibid.*

⁹³ *Ibid.*

elements in finding a job according to their status and to being different from “other classes.”

These aspects of being *empleado*, as opposed to being *obrero*, were clearly reflected in the idea of “being someone in life and in the social hierarchy.”⁹⁴ Clearly, money was not the sole important factor in choosing a job. Perhaps more important was the potential a position offered for upward mobility in social hierarchy.

Empleados always dreamt of moving up in the social hierarchy in order to distance themselves from the working classes. This preoccupation included the nightmare of slipping down in the social pyramid and “suddenly becoming an *obrero*.”⁹⁵ According to *empleado* publications, to become *obrero* was “really dangerous” because it would mean the loss of the capacity for upward social mobility. The *obrero* did not have “the essential social ability to move up and increase his standard of living, to be someone in life, *obreros* always go down.”⁹⁶ The story of Luis and Tomas allows us, again, to see this point clearly. Luis was shown as a professional who had ambitions of moving up in the social hierarchy while Tomás “just wanted to get money to drink beer or *chicha* (corn beer).”⁹⁷ Consequently, Luis, an *empleado* in a company, not an *obrero* in a factory, worked hard to better himself. In one passage, when Tomás went to meet Luis and saw how his brother’s boss had promoted him, Tomás suddenly realized that the

⁹⁴ ACGR, Box: Notificaciones, Folder: 25-56, “Empleados y obreros,” 43, 1943, typescript.

⁹⁵ ACGR, Box: Notificaciones, Folder: 43-45, “Empleados y obreros,” 57, 1945, typescript.

⁹⁶ ACGR, “Empleados y obreros,” 34, 1943.

same was impossible for him because “to be an *empleado* is to improve, to look for the dream that is up there.”⁹⁸ Luis himself thought that to be *empleado*, “was the most beautiful thing had ever happened.” Despite “the economic problems,” he was thankful to be “given the opportunity to be someone important, because *empleados*, well-educated and always professional, win in the game of the social relations.”⁹⁹ While not every *empleado* could move upward, *empleados* still sought to create specific boundaries between *obreros* and themselves and to calibrate the social hierarchy that would always put them in a better position than *obreros*.

All these perceptions created a model for the ideal *empleado*. Although this ideal was in part created by employers, and not all *empleados* could hope to attain it, many *empleados* embraced the image that could distinguish themselves from the working classes. *Empleado* publications presented the idea of what it meant to be an *empleado* in family, moral, political and cultural terms. The *empleado* always appeared as a hard worker who wanted “to be someone in life,” while *obreros* appeared as a persons who worked because “they did not have another options.”¹⁰⁰

Moreover, *empleados* such as Luis sought a lovely wife and wanted a beautiful family with la *parejita* (two children, one of each). The dream was “to live in the family.” (See picture) *Obreros*, such as Tomás, wanted to marry, but

⁹⁷ Contraloría General de la República, *Cartilla de empleados*, 25.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 23.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 26.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 29.

they were prone, it was argued, to spend their money drinking alcohol. They were likely to make their families unhappy. Tomás hardly expected to achieve either a respectable future or middle class social status. Luis was able to find jobs and keep them because he was “good *empleado*” and did not need “someone else to control or supervise him.” In contrast, the manual worker tended “to be fired from jobs because he would join labor unions and hold strange political positions.”¹⁰¹

This concept of “strange political positions ” was created mostly by employers to distinguish the *good empleado* from an *obrero*, as demonstrated by a story published in 1941 in Bogotá. It was the story of two workers who saw themselves differently when a revolution was called against the government. While the *obrero* joined the revolutionary forces, the *empleado* went to offer his services to the government in order to fight for “authority, God and the homeland (*patria*).”¹⁰² The *empleado*, consequently, donned the military uniform, whereas the *obrero* wore the colors of the revolution. At the end of the story, the victorious *empleado* told the *obrero*, “You see, authority always wins. I do not know why you fought for the revolutionary cause. We need people instead who are able to work and make the country richer.”¹⁰³

* * *

¹⁰¹ Pérez Hernández, *Codificación del trabajo*, 35-45.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 56. These political positions were shaped by employer and their idea of controlling the labor relationships. However, to see how these political positions were also different is itself another history. See Green, “Superior to their Leaders,” 240-258.

In Bogotá during the 1940s and 1950s urbanization, industrialization and the expansion of the public and private sectors not only created workplaces for *obreros*, but also allowed for the formation of workplaces for *empleados* of the middle classes. These parallel processes created a specific labor space in which people struggled for a job and began to define what it meant to be an *empleado*. That definition stressed social distinction between the social and cultural conceptions of being worker and non-manual workers. These perceptions and assumptions crucially shaped how these people who called themselves *empleados* and *empleadas* created their own identities in relation to gender, work, and social status. Understanding how these identities were constructed in the everyday experience of both the work place and the home will be the task for the following two chapters.

Chapter 2:

“We Work where the Middle Class work.”¹⁰⁴

Empleados and the Workplace.

During the 1930 and 1950s the expansion of the private service sector and governmental bureaucracy produced crucial changes in the workplace. The growing of number of *empleados* working in larger enterprises and government agencies created new ideas and assumptions about labor relationships. In particular there was a growing process of change between paternalist and impersonal labor relationships and women increased their participation in the service sector. Those changes helped *empleados* and *empleadas* create their own identities and negotiate them in relation to work, gender, and class.

Introduction New labor relationships

By 1937 one-third of all *empleados* worked in establishments of thirty people or more, and some banks had as many as four hundred people working in a single building.¹⁰⁵ New governmental agencies hired many people to work in post and telegraph offices, tax offices, ministries, and schools. By 1940, Colombia had 1,234,456 people categorized as *empleados*. Ten years later, in Bogotá, around 1,500 *empleados* worked in government offices. In the private sector, this number reached 3,000 *empleados*. Older paternalist relationships

¹⁰⁴ Osorio-Lizarazo, *Hombres sin presente*, 45.

began to give away in the face of more impersonal labor relationships, multigraded hierarchies, and standardized promotion patterns. Women also joined the white-collar work force in growing numbers, though generally in poorly paid and low-level clerical jobs.¹⁰⁶ New conditions in the workplaces with ever larger numbers of *empleados* meant that executives and managers no longer had to handle their personnel with the traditional paternalistic touch, even though the older relationships did not disappear overnight. The new impersonal workplace allowed for the creation of new understandings of the workplace and its labor relationships, which stood in clear contrast to traditional patronage relationships.

During the 1920s and 1930s work was not organized in terms of specific tasks or clearly defined jobs. Instead, the labor routine was governed by “*lo que hubiera que hacer*,”¹⁰⁷ according to daily needs. This unspecialized labor organization allowed also for flexibility in both the labor schedule and how it was measured. The hour when work began and when it ended did not have fixed rules; rather, the labor routine was ordered according to the boss’s conception of time. In one *empleado* publication, for example, some remembered

¹⁰⁵ Rafael Viera Moreno, “Situación económica de las clases medias” *Mes Financiero Económico* 6-7 (May-June 1946): 34; International Bank and Government of Colombia, *The Basis of a Development Program for Colombia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1952), 208-230.

¹⁰⁶ Contraloría General de La República, *Estadísticas municipales* (Bogotá: Ediciones Contraloría, 1950), 34.

¹⁰⁷ACGR, Box: Selección de personal, Folder: 2, “Los empleados y el trabajo,” 56, 1940, typescript.

those days when they were able to “sign the book” in order to register when they arrived at work and when they left.

. . . nos acordamos cuando firmábamos el libro que el jefe pasaba por la oficina. El jefe llegaba y colocaba un sello y el que llegará más tarde de ese sello tenía retraso. Nos acordamos que uno podía llegar un ratito tarde y no pasaba gran cosa.¹⁰⁸

The labor schedule, therefore, was not strict; arriving at work later than the boss was not considered very important, and it could be ignored in the labor routine. Memos support that memory of flexible work hours and evidence that labor relationships were not strictly controlled for *empleados* and the workday’s routines were marked by external signs.

El día de hoy nos permitimos informar que la hora de salida será alrededor de las 3:00 de la tarde. Rogamos a todos dejar el puesto de trabajo alrededor de esta hora en aras de llevar a cabo pequeños cambios en las oficinas.¹⁰⁹

Specifically, there was a common practice, the day started when *empleadas* and *empleados* received their first *tintico* (coffee). It meant to them “it was time [*camellar*] to work, so, you did not start until you received the *tintico*.”¹¹⁰ At the same time, *empleados* did not take regular breaks; rather, it was understood that the labor routine would be interrupted periodically when “a [*consome*] broth was sent over, so we knew, that it was around 10 or 10:30, then we knew that it was

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 45

¹⁰⁹ ACGR, Box: Memos de personal, Folder: 23, “Memorando de la sección de contabilidad,” 1, 1930, typescript.

¹¹⁰ Carolina Pedraza, interview by author, July 2000, Bogotá, Colombia, tape recording.

almost time to go have lunch.”¹¹¹ Breaks could be prolonged if “you knew that you did not have things to do”; and it was understood that the work day might be expanded when, “you knew that you had work to do.”¹¹²

Still, quitting time was always measured the same. According to oral history, the bosses walked around the office; and that meant, “the day was over.” Not surprisingly, *empleados* understood this labor routine as different from that of *obreros*. The *empleado* labor schedule, according to them, was marked by the same rhythms as those of the manager or executives. *Empleados* argued that during that period, their work schedules were different from those of the *obreros* because, “. . . one did not have to enter at 8:00 in the morning or earlier, one had flexible hours to work. It depended on the individual.”¹¹³

This flexibility allowed for extracurricular activities. It was common to find handbook references to the celebration of birthdays, Christmas parties, or even Catholic mass. One 1941 handbook published the schedule for a Valentine’s Day party during the daily routine:

8:00: Llegada al trabajo; 9:30-12: Celebración del día del amor y la amistad; 12:2: Almuerzo. 2:00: Retorno a los lugares de trabajo.¹¹⁴

During the late 1930s and 1940s, however, flexible routines began to change toward standardized routines. Many *empleados* experienced diminishing

¹¹¹ Carolina Pérez, interview by the author, July 2000. Bogotá, Colombia, tape recording.

¹¹² Marta Rodríguez, interview by author, July 2000, Bogotá, Colombia, tape recording.

¹¹³ ACGR, Box: Varios, Folder: 2, “Los empleados y el trabajo,” 56, 1941, typescript. María Ramírez remembered that “Teníamos horario de ejecutivo y no de obrero.” María Ramírez, interview by author, July 2000, Bogotá, Colombia, tape recording.

contact with their bosses. Increased mechanization, spearheaded by the time clock, radically altered how the office operated. New labor routines and labor relationships led to the creation of different conceptions of the workplace and the work itself. With the emergence of impersonal relations, *empleados* became numbers, or at best a letter of recommendation.

Now, they were asked to arrive on time and “*marcar tarjeta.*” *Hombres sin presente* in 1938 published the “modern” image of those changes. (figure 5) The clock and calendar demonstrate how important the measure of the time was becoming in the labor routine. Specifically, the *empleado* looked at the clock and the calendar “without knowing what to do.”¹¹⁵ Osorio-Lizarazo and Augusto Morales-Pino, two contemporary writers, showed how this process of depersonalization in labor relationships forced *empleados* to work as “machines,” and how the workplace in contrast to the old days, became more regimented and anonymous:

... van en diferentes direcciones, rápidamente, son anónimos empleados y funcionarios, empleados de bancos, dependientes de almacenes, mecanógrafas, costureras. Se cruzan, se tropiezan unos con otros y miran incesantemente el reloj . . . al final entran a los edificios, cantidad de empleados llegan. Nerviosamente buscan una tarjeta en un tablero que esta colocado en un corredor. Busca su número. Ella el 118, el 120, aquel el 4. Luego van hacia el reloj y marcan la hora. El reloj marca las 8 y 12.¹¹⁶

... las oficinas de los ministerios comienzan a llenarse de agitacion a las ocho de la mañana. De todos los lugares de la ciudad fluyen los

¹¹⁴ ACGR, Box: Varios, Folder: 2, 59.

¹¹⁵ Osorio-Lizarazo, *Hombres sin presente*, 34

¹¹⁶ Morales-Pino, *Los del Medio*, 5.

empleados, que van siendo devorados por el edificio como un mostro implacable.¹¹⁷

As these passages show, one of the most important consequences of change in the workplace was that both the labor relationship and work routines began to be measured and controlled properly by the “clock.”

Enterprises and governmental agencies began to issue manuals and handbooks explaining how *empleados* should manage their labor time in order to both be successful at work and develop daily tasks. In a magazine published in 1942, for example, one enterprise called on *empleados* to organize their time following the “clock model.” The idea was, according to the magazine, that *empleados* should understand time internally and develop a clock-work line discipline. The magazine said:

. . . trabajo más que cualquier mortal, pero mas fácilmente porque lo hago segundo a segundo. Miles de empleados me han preguntado como trabajar en una oficina. Les digo que tengo que hacer miles de tic-tacs para formar un día pero dispongo de un segundo para hacer cada uno de ellos. No los quiero hacer todo a la vez. Los empleados no se preocupan por lo que hicieron ayer, ni tampoco por lo que tendrán que hacer mañana. La ocupación es aqui y ahora, en nuestra oficina. Si quieres vivir contento en ella, trabaja como yo, labora segundo a segundo, minuto a minuto, cada hora, cada día, cada semana, cada mes, cada año, como si se te acabara la cuerda para andar, anda como empleado.¹¹⁸

To overcome the loss of personal contact in the new rationalization of labor relationships, many enterprises and governmental agencies also set up programs designed to rekindle a sense of community in the workplace.

¹¹⁷ Osorio-Lizarazo, *Hombres sin presente*, 93.

Specifically, many firms employed labor metaphors in order to reinforce and understand the new relationships. In particular, the metaphor of the family was common throughout 1940s and 1950s in many service sector offices. This metaphor created and defined specific roles for every aspect of the labor relationship. Enterprises gave the boss or owner the role of father, and by extension of breadwinner. In a dialogue between an *empleado* and his boss in an *empleado* handbook, one can see this point clearly. The boss, as a father, advised the *empleado*, as a son, because the son was complaining of the new way workday discipline was enforced. The boss chided him, saying that to work at an office “is not boring at all,” and that “happiness is rooted in office work.” Consequently, the boss also gave advice on how the *empleados* should just tolerate the new routine. *Empleados* should make the labor routine relaxing and just “letting the labor time pass.” The boss concluded his words telling the *empleado*:

. . . trabaja, muchacho. Sólo son cuatro horas en la mañana y cuatro en la tarde. Has visto como las has resistido? Ahora vete almorzar y vuelve a la hora exacta, precisa y matematica. Otras cuatro horas al día despues del almuerzo. Nadie se muere trabajando ocho horas al día. Si descansas 11 horas al día los domingos por qué no trabajar ocho? Yo solo te exigo ocho y te pago, te visto, te doy de comer. ¿No me lo agradeces?¹¹⁹

In other cases enterprises appeared as the mother who had moral values to instill, the leadership to be followed, and the personal stature to give advice. It is extrardionary how many letters of resignation from *empleados* expressed how

¹¹⁸ APB, Box: 23, Folder: LLL1, “Cartilla de nuestros empleados,” 21, 1942, typescript.

¹¹⁹ APB, Box: 21, Folder: 45, “Cartilla de nuestros empleados,” 34, 1945.

they felt both “orphaned” and “homeless” when they left the enterprise or office. *Empleados* and *empleadas* appeared as both sons and daughters, brothers and sisters. These actors, according to the metaphor, were expected to “work hard for the family” and follow the father and mother who would lead the family on the proper path. One particular letter of resignation submitted after the *empleado* had secured a position in another agency and its response illustrate this point:

Le agradezco haberme permitido ser parte de la familia de la Contraloría . . . se lo he dicho en varias ocasiones personalmente y hoy se lo repito por escrito: siempre lo he considerado como a un padre, al igual que todos los empleados.¹²⁰

The response letter said:

. . . Me entristece su retiro pero a la vez me siento muy orgulloso del cargo que va a desempeñar en otra institución, los padres siempre le desean lo mejor a sus hijos y usted lo sabe bien, que siempre tendrá abiertas las puerta de esta su casa.¹²¹

Although *empleados* and *empleadas* remembered the family metaphor as indicative of the way they understood labor relationships, these rethorical strategies were not merely an emotional dynamic, they were equally an attempt to foster loyalty to a company and a sense of “camaraderia.” In the same spirit, most companies preserved, and many expanded, the practice of giving gifts and decorating the office. Yet even these events became formalized and impersonal. Sports teams, vacation facilities, and special lunches for *empleados* replaced close

¹²⁰ACGR, Box: 31, Folder: G 12, “Mauricio Pérez to Carlos Fandiño,” Bogotá, 23 August, 1942, 1, typescript.

¹²¹ ACGR, Box: 31, Folder: G12, “Carlos Fandiño to Mauricio Pérez,” Bogotá, 27 August, 1942, 1, typescript.

personal relationships that *empleados* had enjoyed in days gone by. Carolina Pedraza, an *empleada*, remembered:

Recuerdo como el jefe de nosotras fue un día y nos llevó un regalo para todas, para las secretarias, entonces nosotras nos sentimos tan importantes porque no nos hicieron menos, un regalo, además nos dieron una prima uy! Eso fue un platanon tenaz, me compré ropa y me sentí muy contenta y entonces me dije, hay que ponerle más vida a esto . . . otra vez se hacían los almuerzos grandes, el director hablaba y eso era una cantidad de gente, los cumpleaños no los podías celebrar tan en grande, los hacíamos en la oficina, pero los almuerzos mensuales era todo un evento, todos tenían que ir, a ver a quién le colocaban la medalla . . . Eso antes no pasaba, pues eramos muy poquitos y todos nos conocíamos. Con los almuerzos grandes eran cuando ya había mucha gente.”¹²²

As *empleados* experienced these changes in the everyday work environment in both the governmental offices and private enterprises, they understood how the impersonalization of labor relationships could increase “the risk of being fired.”¹²³ The absence of a close relationship with a boss, “who can know your situation and, therefore not fire you,”¹²⁴ meant that the job might last a few months depending on the “new minister, new boss, or new manager.”¹²⁵ Many novels and chronicles described this “fear of being fired.”¹²⁶ Additionally, the diaries of *empleados* in both the private and public sectors reflected that new concern; and because it became a pervasive preoccupation among *empleados*, it shaped the labor relationships among them. *Empleados* understood that the

¹²² Carolina Pedraza, interviewed by author, July, 2000, Bogotá, Colombia, tape recording.

¹²³ APB, Box: Empleados, Folder: LLL11, “Nosotros los empleados,” 7, 1943, typescript.

¹²⁴ Camilo Arrollave, “Diary,” University of Chicago, 1948, text-fiche 5L45-98H, 34.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 45.

¹²⁶ Osorio-Lizarazo, *Hombres sin presente*; Morales-Pino, *Los del medio*, 34; and Gómez Picón, *45 Relatos de un burocrata con cuatro parentesis*, 67.

expansion of impersonal work place relationships as an on-going threat. Impersonalization threatened not only loss of one's livelihood, but also meant the possibility of, suddenly, becoming an *obrero* with a "decrease in status."¹²⁷ To have no one to recommend you, and to not continue working in an office environment, was associated with the idea of not being important, and by extension, of not being able to maintain "consumption according to the *empleado's* status."¹²⁸

Consequently, this impersonalism meant that to keep a job did not depend on being close to one's immediate boss anymore. Rather, keeping one's job had started to depend on knowing "somebody in the high rank of the enterprise, at the top of the hierarchies or somebody important in the government offices."¹²⁹ Although one might think that impersonalization in the work environment would lessen the power of patronage, strong evidence indicated that one of the most important consequences of those processes of change was that patronage took on new dimensions.¹³⁰

Empleados had to pay attention to changes in the "high" politics of the organization, much more that ever before, in order to see how they might benefit and avoid being fired. In his diary David Cifuentes, a public *empleado*, spent more than fifty percent of his time describing how everyday work meant the

¹²⁷ David Cifuentes, "Diary," University of Michigan, 1952, text-fiche 5L7-3M11, 34.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 43

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*

possibility of being fired. During work hours, Cifuentes noted that *empleados* spent time talking about, first, who would be the next boss, next manager, or next minister and second who the relatives or friends of these people might be “who could help them to keep the job.”¹³¹ *Empleados* always associated this impersonalism with the specter of being proletarianized and associated with *obreros*.¹³² David Cifuentes, described this situation as follows:

Nosotros en la oficina no hacemos más. Cada ministro, congresista y demás políticos es una nueva amenaza para nosotros, para los que trabajamos ahora, y una esperanza para los que están sin trabajo y buscan vincularse como empleados. Esta *sosobra* de perder el puesto y verse obligado a trabajar en un rango menor de ocupación, es la muerte, nos quita el sueño, nos marca. Y todo depende de las palancas de las jerarquías, palancas, palancas, ese es el punto de apoyo. Las odio, las amo. Dame un punto de apoyo y moveré el mundo, palancas, palancas. Eso es conocer gente importante, influyente, eso es la diferencia, si uno es conocido por gente importante uno puede seguir siendo empleado.¹³³

The everyday preoccupation with being fired shaped *empleados*' identities in the work place. The idea of how to keep a job meant knowing “somebody very important who can insure your job.”¹³⁴ Gómez Picón, a contemporary author, showed how these processes marked the relationships among *empleados*. The author recreated a dialogue between two *empleados* right after the change of the manager. They argued over who had the most important “helper” to keep

¹³⁰ I do not attempt to decipher how patronage and bureaucracy were related and how both worked historically. I just try to see how these new characteristics shaped both the labor relationships and *empleado* identities.

¹³¹ David Cifuentes, “Diary,” 98.

¹³² My research indicates that the *empleado* unions focused on this *sosobra* in the workplace. To see how these complaints worked, historically, will be the subject for a future research.

¹³³ David Cifuentes, “Diary,” 56.

their job. The argument showed that to be an *empleado* meant to know “somebody important who is able to place you in any position, in any office, in any job.”¹³⁵ Consequently, both *empleados* agreed that new superiors meant risking the possibility of not knowing somebody important to their interests and their jobs. And it was clear that those changes meant not only the loss of income, but also the loss of a social importance both within the workplace and outside of it.

New labor relationships were taking shape during 1930s and 1940s. Paternalistic dynamics gave way to impersonal relationships in service jobs. Responsively, *empleados* and *empleadas* began to redefine their own identities because that change threatened their social status as *empleados* in the service sector. For men the threat was down word social mobility; for women it might mean loss of access to a job altogether. These different perceptions were contested in the workplace and both *empleadas* and *empleados* shaped them to create a gendered middle-class identity.

“We Improve the *Empleados* Status.” *Empleados, Empleadas and Social Identity in the Workplace.*

Male *empleados* associated their preoccupation of losing a job with the incorporation of women into the service labor market. By the 1940s female clerical *empleadas* had gone far beyond their early beginnings in the post office

¹³⁴ David Cifuentes, “Diary,” 45.

and telephone company and were now at the center of the office-job revolution. This integration of *empleadas* and into the previously *empleado* work space crucially shaped their gender identities in relation to class.

Many women started to see the possibility of earning money and “helping” the family budget. As noted earlier, while public and private employers frequently rejected married women, many of them exercised different strategies to obtain employment. It was common practice, for example, to simply lie in the interview, or deny one’s children; and then, after they had obtained the job, they would “make public their marital status” and the number of daughters and sons they had. Yet even with a job, married women had to face many everyday problems. Many memos attest to the inventiveness of married women and their many strategies for overcoming the conflict between their office jobs and their role at home. For example, Carolina Velásquez wrote:

Sirva tener mi nombre en consideración para ocupar uno de los nuevos cargos de secretaria que próximamente se necesitará. Dicha solicitud la hago ante las siguientes razones: facilidad de transporte mis hijos y mis responsabilidades en el hogar.

Alberto Pihedrahita responded:

¹³⁵ Gómez Picón, *45 relatos de un burocrata con cuatro parentesis*, 98.

Como es de su conocimiento, es imposible pensar en ese cambio, la solicitud es negada debido a que el trabajo es diferente de la familia.¹³⁶

This exchange illustrated the conflict between the socially accepted model of the homemaker mother for women and workplace expectations. That conflict also played an important role in shaping male *empleado* identities. First, male *empleados* believed that women were being hired because “their beauty benefits” and not because of their educational background. According to such *empleados*, women “were taking away their job opportunities.”¹³⁷ Consequently, *empleados* begun seeking ways to “eliminate women’s work.”¹³⁸ *Empleados* argued that women should be at home taking care of children and that their being employed could be risky for *empleado* families. In a diary, Pedro Ramírez described *empleados*’ efforts to “push women back into the home,”¹³⁹ because the “female sex cannot do a man’s work at all.”¹⁴⁰

No lo entiendo. Eso va a ser una cruzada de tamaño mayor. La mujer debe volver a la casa y ocuparse debidamente de sus obligaciones. Malas consecuencias las que traerá si nuestra mujer, dócil y dedicada, sigue llenando las oficinas con sus cuerpos. Aún peor será si esto continua pues la clase y prestigio serán reemplazados por la falta de moral y la risa invadirá a muchos pues cada vez nos parceremos más a ellos. Que será de nuestra clase media!¹⁴¹

¹³⁶ ACGR, Box: Correspondencia Interna, Folder: L56, “Memo From Carolina Velásquez to Alberto Pihedrahita,” 10 July, 1940, typescript; Folder: L56, response’s letter, from Alberto Pihedrahita to Carolina Velasquez, 12 July, 1940, typescript.

¹³⁷ ACGR, Box: Publicaciones, Folder: 15, “Los empleados y el trabajo,” 56, 1946, typescript.

¹³⁸ Ramírez, “Diary,” University of Michigan, 1952, text-fiche 6F6-4L11, 34.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 47.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 48; and ACGR, Box: Selección de personal, Folder: 2, “Políticas de selección de empleados,” 4, 1940, typescript.

¹⁴¹ Pedro Ramírez, “Diary.” 54.

The question, what will become of our middle class, shaped everyday experience of work. Although there were many *empleados* and *empleadas* in the same jobs, the salary gap was always in favor of the male *empleados*. This salary gap was quite evident. There were many reasons for this difference. Even when men and women had similar educational backgrounds, gender constructions were used to keep “women where they should be,”¹⁴² that is, in roles similar to those in the home. *Empleado* handbooks, for example, pointed out that “women’s work” should be an extension of women’s duties. As a handbook stated in 1946:

. . . para las mujeres desde niñas, las buenas mujeres saben realizar estas tareas, de mecanografía, secretariado y de servicio a la gente. Por eso ellas pueden desempeñar esos oficios fáciles, y los cuales desde la infancia han sido inculcados por las madres.¹⁴³

Culturally, then, it was assumed that if women’s work were “almost natural,” women should not be paid more than men. Because it was culturally believed that women were not the family breadwinners, their salaries “should be pin money.”¹⁴⁴ *Empleados* also argued that because they were “more intelligent” than women that women “should be at the bottom of the labor hierarchy.” This presumption was accompanied by the idea that women at the bottom would help to keep labor order because “they were easier to keep within the rules, more submissive, calm, silent, and obedient.”¹⁴⁵

¹⁴² ACGR, Box: Estudios de Personal, Folder: 22, “Los empleados de los servicios,” 98, 1943, typescript.

¹⁴³ ACGR, Box: Estudios Varios, Folder: 23, “Los empleados y el servicio,” 67, 1940, typescript.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 45.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 34.

Similarly, *empleados* argued that if women worked shoulder by shoulder with them, that could be seen as a proletarianization of their jobs, or as a decline in *empleado* work status because, now, “women were working beside men as *obreras* usually did.”¹⁴⁶ In a short tale published in 1946, one may see this point clearly. An *empleado* was afraid not only of being associated with *obreros*, but also of how *obreros* might see him. In a dialogue between an *obrero* and an *empleado*, the *obrero* laughed at the *empleado* because he was “doing female work . . . doing the jobs of the girls.”¹⁴⁷ *Empleados* saw this as a clear risk to their masculinity because “to work in girls’ space could make them sexually suspect.”¹⁴⁸ The feminization of clerical work in other words threatened masculine identity. With the entrance of women into the office, threats to *empleado* masculinity were also problematic for “their middle class status” because the “women degrade clerical occupations.”¹⁴⁹ Specifically, *empleados* thought that if women took occupations in the service sector, that would mean a decrease in the job’s status, because for them feminization and degradation of status were synonymous processes. As a handbook put in 1945:

Ultimamente hemos apreciado la entrada masiva de mujeres a nuestras oficinas. Cuidadosamente debemos mirar éste fenomeno que al parecer no tiene solución. Peligrosamente, nos llevará a la degradación de nuestra clase y tipo de

¹⁴⁶ AJAOL, Box: Varios, Folder: 71-73, 55. Amanda Cifuentes, *El trabajo de la empleada de clase media*, 47.

¹⁴⁷ ACGR, Box: Estudios de personal; Folder: L76, “Empleado y obrero,” 17, 1943, typescript.

¹⁴⁸ ACGR, Box: Estudios de personal; Folder: L76, “Empleado y obrero,” 49, 1942, typescript.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 42.

trabajo. Sabemos que las mujeres han siempre hecho tareas rutinarias, monótonas y de poca importancia en el campo laboral. Así, preocupantemente nuestro trabajos como empleados se verán pronto calificados como rutinarios y estaremos cada vez más cerca del trabajo de las fábricas donde las mujeres han estado por cantidad. En poco tiempo, el trabajo de empleados será visto, como muchos ya lo han dicho, como algo femenino. Tristeza si no hacemos algo.¹⁵⁰

Empleados faced these questions in many ways. First, they began to distinguish themselves from *obreros* by asserting that “physical and strength of the body, muscular capacity, toughness, or craftsmanship” should not measure their masculinity.¹⁵¹ *Empleado* manuals and handbooks created a new idea of masculinity reflected in *empleados*’ occupations. Specifically, with gender and class overtones *empleados* thought of themselves as “professional and superior” from *obreros* and introduced distinctions between the male identities of *obreros* and those of *empleados*. They, most importantly, were the ones who worried about the family. In the story of Luis and Tomás, we may notice these “new” male identities. Luis, the *empleado*, spent his money for family needs and never “hit his wife or children.”¹⁵² It was his duty as a “good man” to find a “decent job to support his family.” Tomás, by contrast, usually spent his money drinking alcohol, and “hit both his wife and children,” and without a job, “he did not have

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 42

¹⁵¹ Ibid., 89.

¹⁵² Contraloría General de la República, *Cartilla de empleados*, 39.

enough money to support them.”¹⁵³ As many *empleado* handbooks remarked during the 1940s and 1950s,

. . . ser hombre: no sólo es pertenecer al sexo masculino. No es tener musculos, ser fuerte en el cuerpo. Es ser digno y digno de verdad, conciente de sus actos. Es ser creador de un hogar, conseguir un trabajo adecuado, un sistema de vida conyugal; el entender el trabajo no como una necesidad si no como un privilegio, es sentir verguenza de maltratar a la mujer. Hombres así son los verdaderos empleados.¹⁵⁴

Accordingly, to counteract the idea that *empleados* were doing the jobs of the girls, *empleados* themselves made several distinctions between their work and women’s work. Secretaries, receptionists, and in general anyone who did clerical work should not be called *empleado*, because these jobs “could not reach higher status or move up in the work hierarchy. They were too close to working-class jobs.”¹⁵⁵ *Empleado* jobs were those that allowed upward mobility, that potentially could lead to a position as a “manager or boss of some section” that allowed an *empleado* “to be someone in life.”¹⁵⁶ Women could not “move up in the hierarchies.” *Empleados* often cited the example of the secretary and her boss. This relationship was “the best example” to illustrate how women could not move upward in work hierarchies. Women, therefore, should always be “under the direction of a male boss to develop their tasks.”¹⁵⁷ Women could not work as

¹⁵³ Ibid., 24.

¹⁵⁴ ACGR, Box: Estudios de personal, Folder: L76, “Empleados y obreros,” 57, 1943, typescript.

¹⁵⁵ ACGR, Box: Estudios Varios, Folder: A23, “Empleados y obreros,” 38, 1943, typescript.

¹⁵⁶ ACGR, Box: Estudios de personal, Folder: L76, “Empleados y obreros,” 78, 1943, typescript.

¹⁵⁷ APB, Box: Estudios Pícológicos, Folder: M321, “Las mujeres que trabajan,” 21-89, 1947, typescript.

bosses because “their natural tendencies” made them “persons easily swayed by feelings and not by intelligence.”¹⁵⁸

Empleados, then, saw their jobs as more important because women’s jobs were “just an extension of the duties at home.”¹⁵⁹ Secretaries, receptionists and clerical workers, according to *empleados*, should perform tasks such as making coffee, attending visitors, and watering plants because these represented “domestic duties in the workplace.”¹⁶⁰ Women’s jobs, it was believed, were “less important than those of *empleados*” because women did not “need professional preparation.”¹⁶¹ Other “qualities” supposedly required by the secretary, such as “tact, diplomacy, intuition, understanding the boss’s moods” were similarly associated with “women’s natural duties,” specifically, the personality traits deemed to be those of a “good wife.”¹⁶² *Empleados*, then, thought women could take some jobs that, according to them, were extremely close to the role of women at home.

Women, however, did not passively receive these gender constructions. On the contrary, they created their own identities in relation to work, gender, and class status. Importantly, women also thought that their work as *empleadas* could improve their social status. They, too, saw work as a way to be independent, to earn some money, and to have the opportunity “to do whatever

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

¹⁶² Ibid.

we [they] wanted to do.”¹⁶³ Clerical work provided an interesting new opportunity to “improve their status” with more potential “than other available jobs.”¹⁶⁴

Although *empleados* thought that women were “taking their jobs,” *empleadas* perceived otherwise. As we saw earlier, *empleados* argued that they could not be associated with proletarianization because the jobs which were being proletarianized were the ones held by women and not by themselves. *Empleadas* thought that their jobs, far from being at the depressing end of the white-collar spectrum, were jobs that could also help improve the middle class. Specifically, *empleadas* asserted that “they were, in effect, widening the *empleados* class.”¹⁶⁵ Women argued that they were not undergoing proletarianization because they were “serving people, helping people, not working.”¹⁶⁶

In fact, women asserted that they were doing the “key job” to improve “*empleado status*.” *Empleadas*, therefore, thought that their jobs were very important and also identified a big difference between themselves and *obreras* because they were serving; and service was the way to be successful by “being

¹⁶³ACGR, Box: 21, “Secretarias de Contabilidad,” Folder: O43, “¿Por qué somos más importantes?” 37, 1943, typescript.

¹⁶⁴Ibid., 39.

¹⁶⁵APB, Box: Estudios psicológicos, Folder: M321, “Las mujeres que trabajan,” 21-89, 1947, typescript.

¹⁶⁶APB, Box: Escritos de empleados, Folder: 42, “¿Por qué somos más importantes?” 13-37, 1944, typescript.

somebody with social status, being an *empleada*.”¹⁶⁷ A letter from secretaries and receptionists “to whom it may concern” stated,

. . . estos trabajos puede ser desarrollados solamente por mujeres. Porque ellas son las personas ideales para prestar un servicio. Ellas tienen paciencia, capacidad de atención, servicio. Estos trabajos son para las personas de clase media. A través del servicio logramos engrandecer nuestra posición y nos alejamos de trabajos penosos donde hay muchas mujeres pero no se ven. Muchos de nosotros sabemos cuantas pobres obreras que han querido trabajar como secretarias pero su posición no se los ha permitido. Ellas no pertenecen a este trabajo . . . nuestro trabajo asegurará nuestra herencia social, nuestra clase media, nuestro trabajo como empleadas.”¹⁶⁸

As this text shows, women’s identities were related closely with the idea, created by women themselves, that although their roles at work were associated with both domestic jobs and a wife’s duties, to work as a secretary or a receptionist necessary to be “middle class women.” Their jobs would be impossible for women of lower status.¹⁶⁹ Specifically, women thought themselves key to “maintaining middle class status” as both *empleadas* and wives because, “. . . they work in a job where they are developing middle class’ duties for women” and because “. . . their incomes will help to maintain the social status materially.”¹⁷⁰

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., 46.

¹⁶⁸ ACGR, Box: Correspondencia Interna: 1941-1945, Folder: L87, “Secretaria un medio para progresar,” 32, 15 July, 1943, typescript.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., 45. Suggestively, *empleadas* said, “Obreras son obreras, *empleadas* son *empleadas*. Clase obrera es clase obrera. Clase media es clase media.” ACGR, Box: Correspondencia Interna: 1941-1945, Folder: L87, 32.

¹⁷⁰ We will see address the role in preserving the middle-class status in the next chapter.

The negotiation of gender identity was always carried out in relation to class status. *Empleadas* and *empleados* negotiated their gender identities at work. These negotiations also included different everyday experiences at work, which *empleados* and *empleadas* understood as a way to improve, to show, and to preserve their middle class social status.

Appearance and Personal Relationships: Ways to Maintain “Social Status.”

Empleadas and *empleados* negotiated personal appearance and personal relationships in the office environment as a way to obtain both status and a better position, not only in relation to *obreros*, but also in the work hierarchy.

Empleados' diaries illustrated how class and gender shaped these perceptions.

Appearance was crucial for *empleado* identities. According to *empleados*, the way one dresses would demonstrate, “who you are, which position you can claim.”¹⁷¹ In general, the workplace was the space to evaluate “*empleados'* dress as a measure of “moral and status stability.” *Empleados* created a dress code to show whether “they were people, they were cultivated people; [because] the way one dressed said who you are at work, how you feel about yourself and about your job.”¹⁷² Specifically, women were expected to dress as:

¹⁷¹ ACGR, Box: Estudios de personal, Folder: L78, “Empleados y el trabajo,” 34, 1943, typescript. In the next chapter, we will see how clothing expenses marked difference between *empleado* families and working class families.

¹⁷² ACGR, Box: Estudios de personal, Folder: L78, “Empleados y el trabajo,” 43, 1943, typescript.

. . . verdadera secretarias y recepcionistas, con faldas, zapatos de tacón, sin accesorios protuberantes, con medias veladas, y sin deslizamiento de hilos. Sin mucho maquillaje con esmero y sin exageraciones.¹⁷³

Men, in turn, were to dress,

. . . como caballero. Con corbata, zapatos embetunados, y brillantes. Con camisa vestida con dedicación, limpieza y armonía. Simplemente como empleado.”

These dress codes were evaluated in the workplace routine in order to maintain the reputation and respectability of the office. Not surprisingly, the dress code was the way to say whether one could respectably be associated with *empleados* and not *obreros*. In a diary, for example, Marina Alvarez describes a conversation with her co-*empleada* at work. In one passage, she remembered the way in which an *empleado* was dressed. According to her, he was running a risk because the *empleado* “. . . did not dress in a tie, his sweater was very dirty and his shoes were torn”; even worse, “it was not the first time that he dressed like this.”¹⁷⁴

Although she knew “he was in an economic crisis,” she still thought, “he should keep up the way he dressed for work because he would be seen by many people on his way to work and you know how people talk.”¹⁷⁵ *Empleado* publications reinforced the idea that to go to work well-dressed would avoid “confusion

¹⁷³ ACGR, Box: Estudios sobre personal, Folder: X21, “¿Cómo vestir en el trabajo?” 47, 1945, typescript.

¹⁷⁴ Marina Alvarez, “Diary,” University of Chicago, 1948, text-fiche 34L-56O11, 67.

between who is *obrero* and who is *empleado*” and warned *empleados* to “take care with their dress if they really wanted to keep their jobs.”¹⁷⁶

Women, in turn, were also worried about dressing properly for their jobs. Marina Alvarez in her diary always ended daily descriptions with her preoccupation about “what I will wear to work tomorrow.”¹⁷⁷ In the office environment, women’s dress also reflected “femininity according the social status.”¹⁷⁸ To dress properly as both “*empleadas* and women” would avoid the danger of being associated with other classes. Specifically, women created the idea that they should dress as a members of the middle-class and not as “*obreras* or *ricachonas*.” They criticized, how both *ricachonas* (rich people) and *obreras* dressed and defended the way that middle-class women dressed because,

... las mujeres ricachonas se visten con anillos y aretes extravagantes con maquillaje exagerado, todo simplemente por llamar la atención y las obreras quienes no tienen ninguna preocupación por vestirse adecuadamente y menos por resaltar la feminidad.¹⁷⁹
... vestimos como mujeres de clase media. Con un maquillaje moderado, con la debida ropa para vernos atractivas y femeninas.¹⁸⁰

Both *empleados* and *empleadas* embraced these canons in dressing well at work because, doing so would project valued respectability and reputation. They believed in “telling me how you dress and I will tell who you are” and dressing

¹⁷⁵ ACGR, Box: Notificaciones, Folder: L2, “Empleados y el trabajo,” 47, 1943, typescript.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 32.

¹⁷⁷ Alvarez, “Diary,” 45.

¹⁷⁸ ACGR, Box: Notificaciones, Folder: L2, “Empleados y el trabajo,” 58, 1943, typescript

¹⁷⁹ Marina Alvarez, “Diary,” 56; and ACGR, Box: Notificaciones, Folder: L2, “Empleados y el trabajo,” 30, 1943, typescript.

well at work would give one the desired reputation because “clothes make the man.”¹⁸¹

In addition to the construction of class identity based on work place dynamics, *empleados* and *empleadas* also created new social relations in the workplaces. Diaries and *empleado* publications illustrate how the work environment became the place where many office workers met future spouses and created close personal relationships. Annual in house-magazines handbooks dedicated part of every issue to announcing the marriages between *empleados* and *empleadas*. Office marriage were perceived as a way of preserving respectability, reputation, and prestige for *empleados* as members of the middle class.

Diaries along with love letters published in *empleado* magazines demonstrated how the language of class shaped these personal relationships. Significantly, *empleados* situated friendships and love relationships in relationship to work. The type of work, the status of the job, and the importance of it in the office environment marked the social importance given to marrying someone. Sofia Cifuentes, for example, contemplated the qualities of her suitor after receiving a love note,

. . . hoy al amanecer, desperté extremadamente contento, sabiendo que en pocas horas te vería en nuestra oficina. Al entrar te vi más bella que nunca atendiendo a la gente, desvelandote por hacer bien trabajo. Te busqué a la

¹⁸⁰ ACGR, Box: Correspondencia interna: 1941-1945, Folder: 56, “Secretaria un medio para progresar,” 28, 1945, typescript.

¹⁸¹ ACGR, Box: Notificaciones, Folder: M2, “Empleados y el trabajo,” 56, 1943, typescript. I have found the book by Carla Freeman very helpful in understanding how people created their own identities in the workplace; See her *High Tech and High Heels in the Global Economy: Women, Work, and Pink-Collar Identities in the Caribbean* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2000).

hora del almuerzo, no te encontré, por eso te dejo esta pequeña nota diciéndote lo mucho que he pensado en ti.¹⁸²

After receiving this note, Sofia, an *empleada*, started to think about the possibilities of marrying to its sender. The main reason to do so was that “he was a *buen partido* (good match) with whom to spend the rest of her life. He was a hard worker, and with him, I [she] could be someone in life, with a future. With little money perhaps, but enough to continue with class, not to be rich, but neither to be poor, to live well.”¹⁸³ There was, however, a problem. The *empleado* in question “could not be promoted, and he had to keep the same salary.”¹⁸⁴

Clearly, *empleados* and *empleadas* pondered class dynamics when contemplating marrying someone. They were concerned about finding someone at work who was able to “give them a respectable future according to their social status.”¹⁸⁵ To be able to do so, women looked for someone “without *culebras* (financial debts)” in order to marry someone who could insure a higher standard of living. *Empleadas*’ publications often published articles about how to find “a good husband and make a *buen partido* (good match).” According to one article, a *buen partido* should be:

. . . quien es juicioso, responsable con la casa y el hogar. Que no es gallinazo, charlatan, ni un don Juan. Pero debe ser soñador, confrontista, triunfador.¹⁸⁶

¹⁸² Cifuentes, “Diary,” University of Chicago, 1948, text-fiche, 4T-56L, 43.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*, 34.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 10.

¹⁸⁵ Gómez Picón, *45 relatos de un burocrata*, 31.

¹⁸⁶ ACGR, Box: Escritos de empleados, Folder: 38, “el buen partido,” 39-48, 1943, typescript.

Such characteristics would give a woman the opportunity to maintain a respectable marriage, her feminine reputation, and class respectability. In addition, women worried that if they did not marry someone, remaining single would threaten their middle-class status. They were running the risk of “being a nun.” Marriage was crucial for women, therefore, because remaining unmarried was associated with something other than middle class status.

Beyond marrying someone who could insure a middle class status future, *empleadas* perceived that marriage should be sanctified by the church. That would give women respectability in relation to lower classes, whose marriages were sanctioned by civil ceremonies and for whom, consequently, their home and family did not reflect moral virtue.¹⁸⁷ A simple secular marriage would mean going against “morality” and could degrade one’s “social status.”¹⁸⁸

Marriage also played an important role in the identities of *empleados*. Also concerned with preserving class-based on image, an *empleado* would seek a woman who would retreat from the “public sphere” after marriage. Marrying a woman “who likes to work outside the home after marriage” would mean degrading their social status because *empleados* wanted to have “*los pantalones en la casa*.” They wanted, then, someone who was “submissve, feminine, . . . they wanted to build a home under God’s law.”¹⁸⁹

¹⁸⁷ ACGR, Box: Escritos de empleados (secretarias y recepcionistas), Folder: 34, “El matrominio,” 32-46, 1945-48, typescript.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 32-46.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

Empleados and *empleada* publications used to publish love letters among *empleados*. Sometimes there were songs with love dedications, some times just love letters. These cultural experiences exhibited crucial aspects of how they saw themselves as part of the middle class. A magazine called *Empleados y el trabajo* serialized two stories monthly during 1943. One story told of an *obrero* who “wanted to be a friend” of an *empleada*. The other depicted the friendship between an *empleada* and *empleado*. In the first story the *empleada* “tried not to be seen [with her date] near the office” because “her co-workers would say that she was not an *empleada*.” In one passage, the *empleada* was “caught having lunch with the *obrero*.” Later, in the office “nobody wanted to talk with her because she purposely endangered their middle-class status by associating with an *obrero* who just want to pretend to be *empleado*.”¹⁹⁰ In direct contrast, in the story about the relationship between an *empleada* and *empleado*, it was possible to make it public right away. The story told of the daily routine when every single day the *empleado* picked the *empleada* up “outside of the office with the very purpose of being seen by the co-workers.” The purpose was to celebrate the fact that they both “had somebody from the exactly same social status.”¹⁹¹ These stories illustrate how *empleados* constructed their lives using the language of class.

Diaries also described similar experiences in the workplace. Sofia Cifuentes, for example, became anxious about going to work where “there was

¹⁹⁰ ACGR, Box: Notificaciones, Folder: L2, “Empleados y el trabajo,” 69, 1943, typescript.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 31.

someone very important to her. He was an *empleado* in another section.”¹⁹² For many days Sofia wrote that she dreamt of marrying him, making a home where they “. . . could live well without being either rich or poor.”¹⁹³ Then, one day, Sofia wrote that this “*empleado*, the love dream, became an *obrero* because he was fired and he had to work in a factory to survive in life.”¹⁹⁴ After many days of thinking about it and talking with her friends in the office, Sofia concluded that she “had to forget him and continue working as *empleada* to be some one in life.”¹⁹⁵ These experiences were at the center of the office environment.

Empleados and *empleadas* through these experiences sought to preserve their social status as members of the middle class. Their jobs were a way to do that.

* * *

Empleados and *empleadas* experienced historical transformations in the workplace. Those transformations included the mechanization of the work day, expansion and differentiation of work places hierarchies, and feminization of the service sector. Responding to those transformations men and women office workers constructed new conceptions of office work and their own class and gender notions of what it meant to be middle class. In so doing, *empleadas* and *empleados* interacted to create new social relationships.

¹⁹² Cifuentes, “Diary,” 56.

¹⁹³ Cifuentes, “Diary,” 67.

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 54.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 32.

Introduction Chapter 3

Introduction “There Will Be Always Ways to Be Different from Them.”¹⁹⁶

The Formation of Material and Cultural Differences.

Avanzó por la calle principal, llena de cafes ruidosos, de tranvías, de automóviles en las bocacalles. Iba contando su salario. Veintiseis cincuenta, iba diciendo mientras acariciaba el dinero en el bolsillo del pantalón: 30 para el arriendo, 2.50 para la muchacha de servicio, 4 centavos de lo que debo en la tienda, 2 pesos para el médico, que vio a Pedrito, ¿cuánto me queda? . . . Pasaría al lado de los obreros quienes sentirán envidia. . . Era ya el crepúsculo sin que nadie, ningún amigo, ningún conocido lo hubiera visto, si ese había sido el objeto de memorable paseo por el campo gentil que se da para entregarse a la clase media.

Osorio Lizarazo, *Hombres sin presente*, 197.

Beyond *empleados* constructing their middle class identities in a close work environment and creating new work and personal relationships, *empleados* developed new ways of living and new cultural ideas about themselves and the people around them. The historical changes of the 1940s obliged *empleados* to create new social assumptions, cultural conceptualizations, class ideas, and social practices that would distinguish their class from those above and those below. Neither *ricachones* nor *obreros*, *empleados* readily understood that to create material and cultural differences would give them the social significance they wanted to distinguish themselves from “other classes.” In doing so, they noticed that their means limited their aspirations; consequently, *empleados* pursued diverse ways to be able to match their material expectations and their preferred

cultural distinctiveness. In that pursuit, women played an important role in not only improving *empleado* status, but also in keeping it in the middle of the social scale.

Dangerous Times for *Empleados* Aspirations :

Urbanization, industrialization and the expansion of the service sector combined with the privations generated by the World War II to increase dramatically the cost of living for Colombians during the late 1930s through the 1940s, and into 1950s.¹⁹⁷

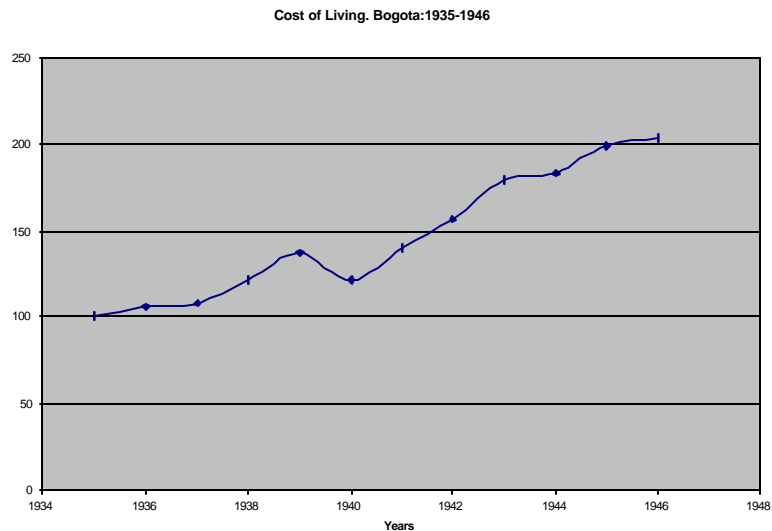


Table 4: Cost of Living. Source: Bernardo Ospina Yepes, *La inflación en Colombia* (Bogotá: Editorial ABC, 1940), 65.

¹⁹⁶ Osorio-Lizarazo, *Hombres sin presente*, 48

¹⁹⁷ Eduardo Saénz Rovner, *Ofensiva empresarial, políticos e industriales* (Bogotá: Tercer Mundo Editores, 1995), Chapter 2.

A study published in 1940 on the material conditions of Colombian life concluded that *empleados* were living under an inflationary cloud that could be a “threat to their status.”¹⁹⁸ As Table 4 shows, the cost of living rose steadily to 1939, and dramatically during and after World War II. Rents rose significantly; the cost of food tripled; the cost of clothing quadrupled; and general expenses increased five fold. These historical circumstances meant, as a white-collar movement put it, that “the *empleados*’ salary was not enough.”¹⁹⁹ The data published in 1940 pointed out the “*empleados*’ situation,” because of these inflationary pressures, made them “the most suffering class in Bogotá and elsewhere.”²⁰⁰ These economic conditions affected all social classes in Bogotá, but especially *empleados* and their pretensions to membership in the middle class. Particularly, these historical transformations increased “the danger” that *empleados* and *obreros* might be “easily confused.”²⁰¹ For this very reason, therefore, these historical transformations were crucial in the construction of *empleado* identities, not only as they struggled against inflationary pressures, but also as the context in which *empleados* experimented with many cultural and material strategies for differentiating themselves from other social classes, especially from those the *empleados* perceived below themselves.

¹⁹⁸ Bernardo Ospina Yepes, *La inflación en Colombia* (Bogotá: Editorial ABC, 1940), 65.

¹⁹⁹ Quintana Pereyra, *La redención de la clase media* (Bogotá: Editorial ABC, 1938), 15.

²⁰⁰ Ospina Yepes, *La inflación en Colombia*, 19.

The *Contraloría General de la República* conducted two studies on the cost of living for both the working and the middle classes after World War II. Both studies confirmed that inflation definitely threatened the middle-class social status of *empleados*. To begin with, *empleado* salaries were always closer to those of *obreros* than to those of the upper middle classes.

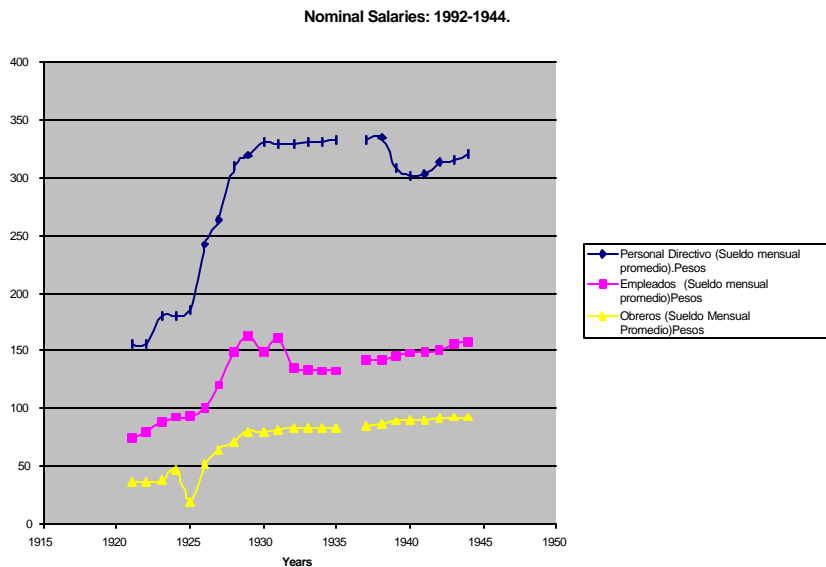


Table 5: Nominal Salaries. *Empleados vs obreros*. Source: Contraloría General de la República, “*Las Condiciones económico-sociales de la clase media en Bogotá* (Bogotá: Ediciones de la Contraloría, 1946), 57. See also, Urrutia, *Compendio*, 57 and Pardo, *Geografía*, 45.

Because inflation threatened their status, *empleados* had to construct cultural identities that distinguished them from the laboring classes. Significantly, the *Contraloría* study argued that while *empleado* salaries might be closer to those of *obreros* than to the incomes of the professional *elite*, there were very important differences: while *obreros* “lived with the dilemma of the life or

²⁰¹ Ibid., 21.

death, just to survive,” *empleados* “were concerned with the idea of living modestly, but well.”²⁰² *Empleados*, then, spent their money and organized their family budget very differently. They sought to have a “reasonable standard of living” reflective of their social status. In practice, this generated the unsolved dilemma of rising material aspirations on very tight budgets. *Empleados*, therefore, closely related their material practices to cultural and social constructions about being different from “other classes ” in order to define a specific place in the social hierarchy.

“Avoiding *el qué dirán*.”

Empleados were always worried about keeping up a “reasonable standard of living,” according to a specific social standing. This relationship defined the expectations and aspirations that *empleados* materially should follow, if they wanted to be associated with middle-class status. These historical actors created many material practices to assure themselves a unique place in the social hierarchy. The expenses, money, consumption, and the conceptions around the different items in the budget family, *empleados* always complained, had to be in accordance with their social position. In many novels, *empleados* summarized this eternal preoccupation by saying that “they were always avoiding becoming the object of gossip (*el qué dirán*).”

²⁰² Ibid., 22.

One practice that clearly established middle-class status was employing a maid. The study of *empleado* living costs demonstrated that for 1942; in marked contrast to the working class, *empleado* families were much more likely to employ “*sirvientas* or *muchachas de servicio* (household help).” *Empleado* families were likely to have at least one live-in domestic. Employing household help was, however, more than just a matter of having someone to clean the house. The *sirvienta* played vital role in maintaining the family’s middle-class status. There were downsides to employing a *sirvienta*, however. In the ideal, the *sirvienta* should be “*recatada* (reserved) because she had the opportunity “to talk about the family outside the home.”²⁰³ A principal duty of the *sirvientas* was to buy food, where she would “find many other *sirvientas* and talk about the families.” Moreover, *sirvientas* were expected to “keep up appearances.”²⁰⁴ In the Osorio-Lizarazo dialogue between an *ama de casa* (housekeeper) and a *sirvienta*, the reader can reflect on how the preoccupation with appearances worked. The *ama de casa* told the *sirvienta* “. . . to hurry up, and go to the store, but not talk about our economic crisis. Buy the things we usually buy and do not say a word about our situation. This is our business. If I find out that you blabbed something, you will be sent to your house in the countryside right away. I do not want to be the subject of gossip because of our situation. Can you imagine what they might

²⁰³ Osorio-Lizarazo, *Hombres sin presente*, 32.

²⁰⁴ ACGR, Box: Asuntos Personales, Folder: R2, “Las muchachas de servicio,” 32, 1940, typescript.

say? ”²⁰⁵ As this text suggests, the *sirvienta* was expected to keep “the *empleado*’s secrets at home” in order to maintain the family’s preferred social status.

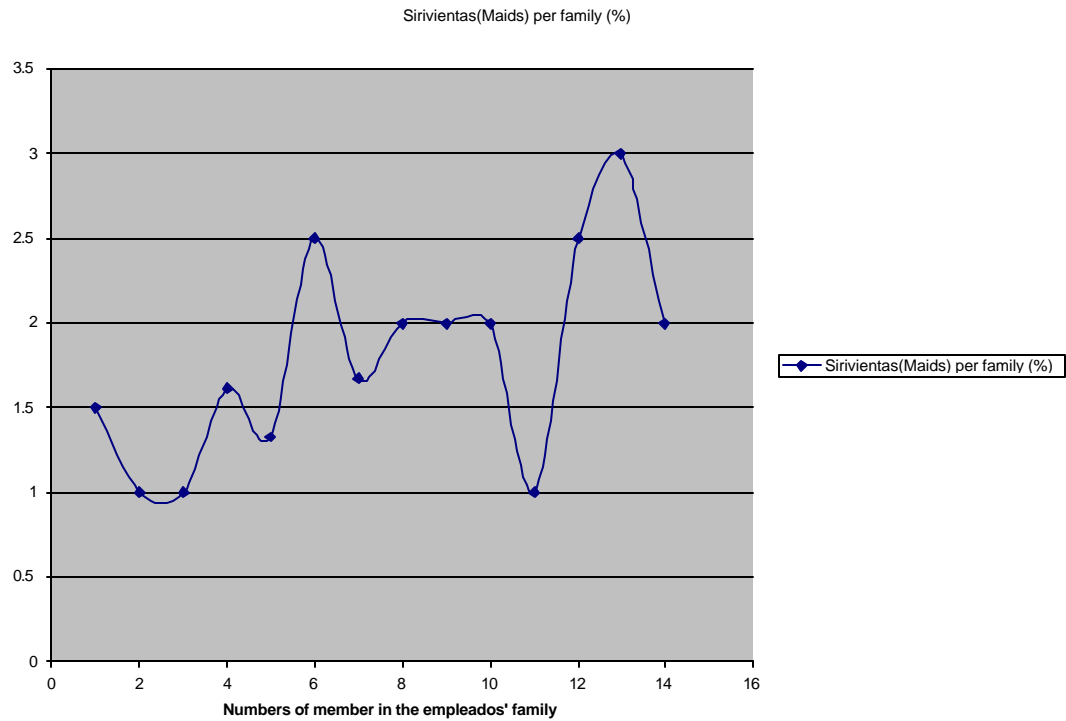


Table 6: Maids per family. Source: Contraloría General de la República, “*Las Condiciones económico-sociales de la clase media en Bogotá* (Bogotá: Ediciones de la Contraloría, 1946), 23.

Empleados also saw having a *sirvienta* as a way to reinforce hierarchical power relationships. Osorio-Lizarazo illustrated this point by showing how *empleados* hired *sirvientas* to “feel like that they were bosses [patrones] who had power over someone.”²⁰⁶ In one passage, for example, the *sirvienta* was chastised because, “instead of saying *sumerce, mande*, [At your order, sir; at your service]

²⁰⁵ Osorio-Lizarazo, *Hombres sin presente*, 37.

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 32.

she had said the given name of *empleado*.”²⁰⁷ Such informality undermined, indeed, the hierarchical social order and the *empleado*’s place in that social order. *Empleados* thought that having a *sirvienta* would allow them to exercise some power that, perhaps, they did not have at work. Consequently, *empleados* could return from work to a situation of dominance over an “inferior” who could make them feel important at home as a “jefe del hogar.” The presence of the *sirvienta*, therefore, allowed the *empleado* to create, and reinforce traditional hierarchy in the domestic sphere.²⁰⁸

Nevertheless, in an *empleado* household the *sirvienta* often enjoyed a close relationship with the *ama de casa*, as a helper in the housekeeping. The middle class would normally have just one *sirvienta*, not only because of the cost, but also because only “upper class people had many maids at home.” *Empleados* feared that to have many *sirvientas* would mean running the risk of turning over “rule of home to their maids.”²⁰⁹ What is more, giving up the rule of home to the *sirvientas*, as many *ricahonas* families did,²¹⁰ would bring their middle-class status into “moral degradation because children would be brought up by maids, and not by their mothers.”²¹¹

Another crucial element of *empleado* identity was diet. The studies published by *Contraloría General de la República* issued in 1942 and 1946 showed

²⁰⁷ Ibid.

²⁰⁸ Ibid., 33.

²⁰⁹ ACGR, Box: Asuntos Personales, Folder: R2, “Muchachas de Servicio,” 39, 1944, typescript.

²¹⁰ Ibid., 35.

²¹¹ Ibid., 45.

how *empleado* diets “were widely different from those of *obreros*.”²¹² In general terms, “the distribution of the three food groups were better balanced than in the *obrero* diet.”²¹³ These differences were also rooted in cultural assumptions about the way one should eat. Both studies assumed that their findings were not new at all, because *empleados*, as part of the middle class, “. . . must have a better diet given their social requirements.”²¹⁴ As one of these studies remarked in 1942,

Los empleados presentan, al igual que su estatus, una mejor dieta de alimentos y comida que la de los obreros. Se ha encontrado un mejor equilibrio que en la clase obrera. Se advierte mayor intervención de los alimentos ricos en buenas albuminas, tales como la leche, queso y huevos y también de aquellos que sin ser muy abundantes en elementos óptimos, sin embargo los contiene: verbigracia, la carne y el pescado.²¹⁵

²¹² Contraloría General de La República de Colombia, *Regimen alimenticio de la clase media* (Bogotá: Ediciones Contraloría, 1946), 45-59.

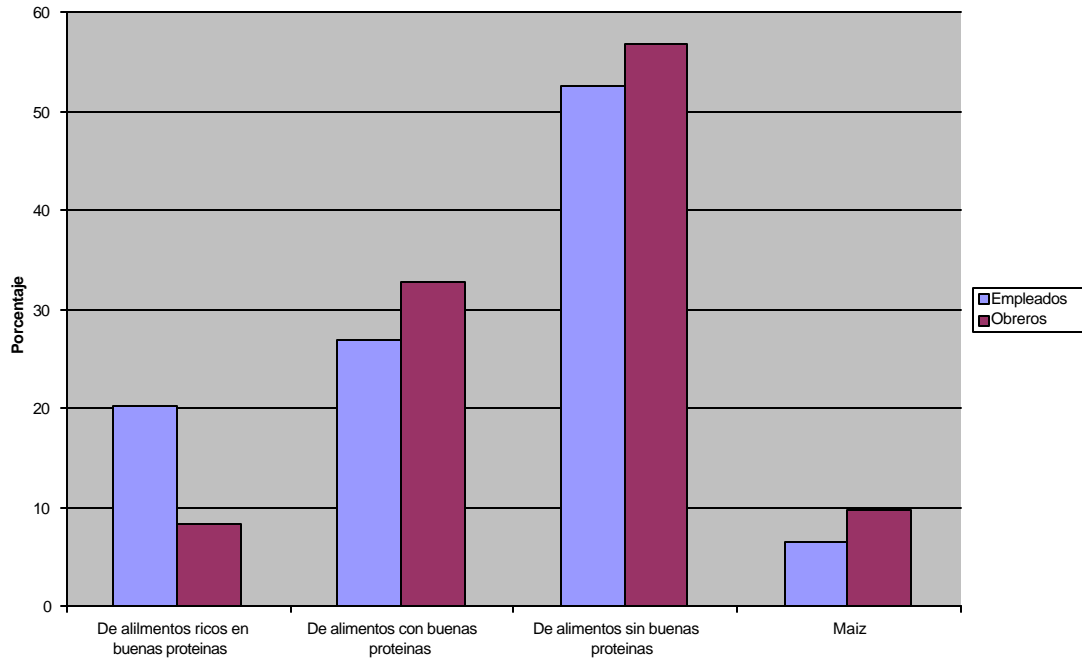
Aristides García Torres, “Algo sobre la dieta y critica de la ración alimentacia de la clase media y los empleados en Bogotá,” *Revista de Medicina* 23 (May, 1942): 347-379.

²¹³ Contraloría General de la República, “*Las condiciones económico-sociales de la clase media en Bogotá* (Bogotá: Ediciones de la Contraloría, 1946), 45.

²¹⁴ García Torres, “Algo sobre la dieta,” 347-379; and Contraloría General de la República, *Regimen alimenticio de la clase media*, 45-59.

²¹⁵ Contraloría General de la República, *Las condiciones económico-sociales de la clase media en Bogotá*, 98.

Distribución de proteína



Distribución de algunos aliment

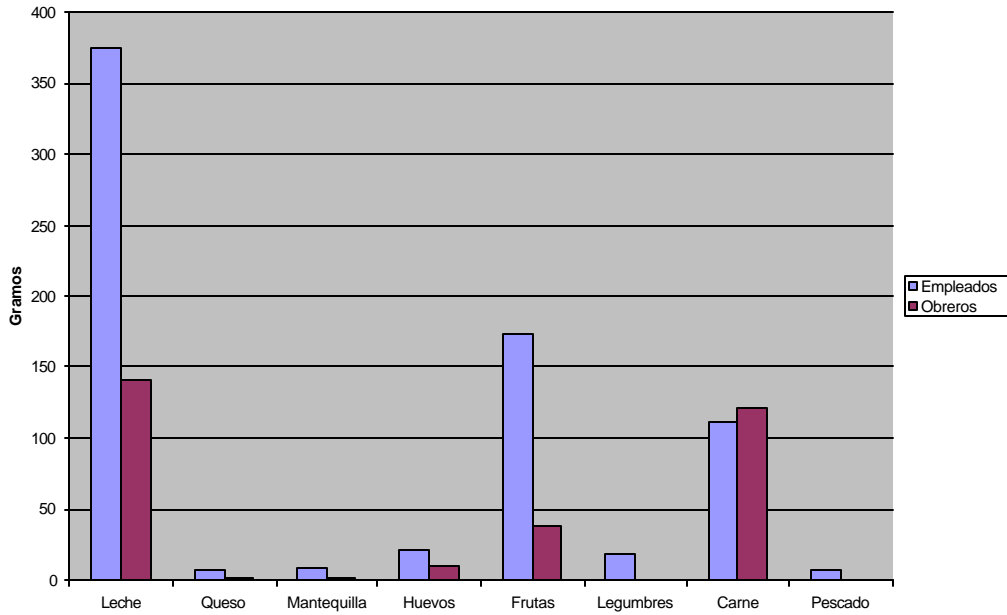


Table 7 and 8: Three food groups: *Empleados vs Obreros*. Source: Contraloría General de la República, *Las Condiciones económico-sociales de la clase media en Bogotá*, 67.

The consumption of food was clearly linked to social standing. To wit, the things one bought to eat “dignified” not only one’s standard of living, but also one’s social status. A well-balanced diet was associated with having “good taste,” giving specific social meaning to consumption. Consequently, having the “right food,” not only in terms of health, but also in both cultural and social terms, helped make *empleados* assert membership in the middle class. Although *empleados* thought that a specific diet would be a way to avoid the appearance of “economic need,” they also believed that their diet should be different from *obreros*, as an article published in 1943 argued, because, “. . . some do intellectual work and some do manual work.”²¹⁶ The article remarked,

. . . las variaciones en la escala social se ven fielmente reflejadas en las diferencias de las dietas. Si en una casa hay personas dedicadas a los trabajos intelectuales, la alimentación debe ser con preferencia las verduras, alimentos bien constituidos, carne, té y café. Por regla los empleados quienes hacen trabajo intelectual deben comer mejor pues su trabajo y su escala social les exige una muy buena alimentación, lo que no ocurre con la clase obrera donde la harina y la grasa pueden satisfacer la necesidad de clase y tipo de trabajo.²¹⁷

²¹⁶ Facultad de Medicina, Universidad Nacional de Colombia, “El trabajo intelectual de los empleados” *Revista de Medicina* 23 (June 1943): 18.

²¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 19.

Alimentos de Lujo: 1942

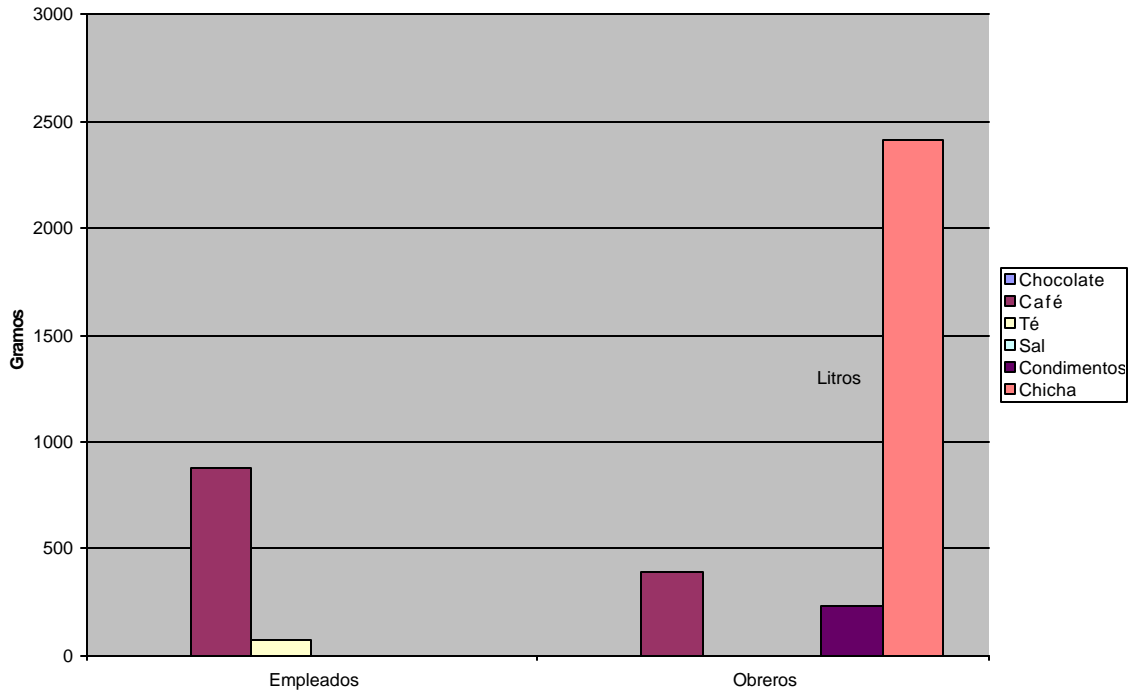


Table 9: Luxury Items. *Empleados vs obreros*. Source: Contraloría General de la República, “*Las Condiciones económico-sociales de la clase media en Bogotá*”, 75.

Food consumption, therefore, provided another way for the *empleado* family distinguish itself from the working class. Both the 1942 and 1946 studies also noted that in the consumption of luxury items, for example, a major distinction between *empleados* and *obreros* was the consumption of tea. In the *empleados*' diet tea played an important role; *obreros* did not consume it at all. For *empleados* this had social and cultural meaning. Osorio-Lizarazo, for example, showed how *empleados* understood this difference in both economic and cultural terms. An *empleado* and his wife discussed what they would serve guests of a party for their son's baptism. The *empleado* suggested that the drink for the party would be chocolate. His wife reacted sharply and said, “that cannot be,

”because, “ chocolate is also used by *obreros*.” She argued that it would be better to choose tea, because “that would give them social status and caché.”²¹⁸

. . . Betty declaró que era indispensable ofrecer un té el día del bautismo. Era conveniente mostrar que su suerte no era tan triste como seguramente lo supondría y que si bien no se había casado con un hombre rico, a lo menos lo había hecho con personas de iniciativa. El té mostraría, de entrada, esa capacidad de hombre que iría hacia arriba y no quería ir hacia abajo.²¹⁹

Differences in diet were accompanied by *empleado* preoccupation with shopping in the “right place,” according to both their social status and their budget. The studies carried out by *Contraloría General de la República* about *empleados* illustrated how they sought specific places to shop for different reasons. *Empleados* shopped at the supermarket because “it was a place that would give social status, and caché.”²²⁰ Yet, *empleados* also had to seek out other places that were “cheaper,” and where “the prices could fit nicely within their budgets.”²²¹

Where and on what to spend their limited incomes represented much of the *empleado* dilemma, and by extension the middle class situation during the first half of the twentieth century. On the one hand, shopping in places which

²¹⁸ Osorio-Lizarazo, *Hombres sin presente*, 126.

²¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²²⁰ According to the *Contraloría General de la República*, *empleados* bought from Almacenes la Corona, Almacenes Ley, Drogería New York, Plaza de Mercado de Chapinero and las Cruces.

²²¹ *Contraloría General de la República*, *Condiciones económico-sociales de la clase media en Bogotá*, 96.

gave “caché” helped maintain the social space separated them from “*obreros* who bought things in *la tienda de la esquina* (corner store) y en *la plaza de mercado* (farmer market).” On the other hand, *empleados* had to “suffer contact with *obreros* in the *plaza de mercado*” because in these places *empleados* could save money and afford many material things. But the social pain of this obligation of going to the *plaza de mercado* was lessened by another difference between *empleados* and *obreros*: the “working class shopped in a *tienda de la esquina* and *la plaza de mercado* almost everyday,” while “*empleados* always bought weekly or even monthly” in order to manage properly the family budget.”²²²

Clothing expenses were also very important in shaping *empleado* identities. This item in the family budget demonstrated a major difference *vis-avis* both the working and upper classes. *Obreros*, in general, did not spend beyond the strictly necessary to dress themselves. In direct contrast, *empleados* on average spent 11.1 percent of their incomes on clothing. Such differences expressed the cultural and social assumptions about the role of clothing and the proper way to dress.

Empleados believed that how they dressed clearly demonstrated the difference “between those who have [middle-class] status and those who do not.”²²³ As noted previously, according to diaries, magazines and novels, clothing was essential to any attempt to attain and preserve respectability. Diaries especially illustrated how clothing was the key to being successfully

²²² Ibid., 89.

²²³ ACGR, Box: Estudios Laborales, Folder: LL11, “La ropa y la clase,” 45, 1941, typescript.

distinguished from other social classes. In particular, dress should follow the canons of “elegance.” To be “*caballeros* (gentleman) and *señoras* (ladies)” meant to dress well on every occasion, even though few if any *empleados* or their wives could afford to always have the “right dress.” Osorio Lizarazo showed how there was one form of dress for “*entre casa* (inside home)” and another for “outside, especially, when one was seen by other people.”²²⁴ This difference made *empleados* think that “there are cloths for showing and there are cloths to wear inside the home.” In this way, they would be able “to show off the best in public and avoid bad comments.”²²⁵ In the case of public sector *empleados*, a new suit could be a very “important question and make everyone in the house happy,” because a new suit would make it possible to go for a “Sunday walk, be seen by other *empleados* and their families, and make them jealous.”²²⁶

Empleados thought that knowing how to dress well and being able to do it were the keys to distinguishing them from the working classes who could not afford to dress well or understand the conventions; after all, “one could recognize them [the working classes] in the street by their dress.”²²⁷ As Osorio Lizarazo put in *Hombres sin presente*,

. . . cuando tenía que ir a la calle a visitar a su hermana Helena, que llevaba en otro barrio la misma vida mecánica de las señoras de clase media, vegetando resignadamente con su marido, vestía la poca mejor ropa que pudiera tener para hacer de su existencia un gran ficción

²²⁴ Osorio-Lizarazo, *Hombres sin presente*, 45.

²²⁵ Cifuentes, “Diary,” 15.

²²⁶ Osorio-Lizarazo, *Hombres sin presente*, 47.

²²⁷ Cifuentes, “Diary,” 17.

ostentosa. Betty se vestía cuidadosamente y cambia su ropa de entrecasa, se maquilla e iba rumbo a que fuera vista para mantener su estatus a ojos de las esposas de otros empleados.²²⁸

. . . te pondrás el vestido, te envidiarán, incluso tus compañeros de trabajo y en la oficina. Te verán Jacinto Peña, Luis Vargas y hasta Hipolito Linares. Habrá que revisar la corbata, y la camisa. . . podrás pasar por la Calle Real , entrar a los cafes , conversar con algún amigo, saldrás a misa y al parque nacional.²²⁹

Osorio-Lizarazo showed how the preoccupation with having the right cloths was an everyday concern. To have no money to spend on clothing was a sign of very grave financial emergency. Diaries are also very suggestive on this point. In one description, the author wrote of personal problems in the workplace because, “. . . everyone else bought a new suit at least monthly,” and he “ has not been able to do so.” This problem was crucial for appearance because he was mortified that the other *empleados* “should be thinking about him, and know his economic crisis. He would be the talk of the workplace.”²³⁰ Still it was “not important to be rich to dress properly and belong to the good society.”²³¹ In fact, *empleados* thought that one of the most important characteristics was “. . . to dress well, without extravagance, without showing greed, as *ricachones* usually do.”²³² In short, clothing was another material and cultural difference whereby *empleados*,

²²⁸ Osorio-Lizarazo, *Hombres sin presente*, 49.

²²⁹ *Ibid.*, 109.

²³⁰ Biblioteca Nacional, *Diario de un empleado público*, Box: empleados, Folder: 1934-1956 , 45, 1943.

²³¹ ACGR, Box: Estudios de Personal, Folder: R21, “Empleados y el vestido,” 31, 1945.

²³² *Ibid.*, 38.

as a part of the middle class, created their identity in order to keep themselves in the middle.

Housing was also a crucial aspect of *empleado* identities. According to the 1946 study directed by *Contraloría General de la República*, 9.43 percent of *empleados* lived in houses with two or three rooms, 69.82 percent lived in houses with eight rooms, and 20.75 percent lived in houses with more than nine rooms.²³³ The study also pointed out that by 1942, most *empleados* (89 percent) rented their homes. These statistics did not mean, however, that *empleados* lived with space and luxury. Rather, *empleados* usually, as this study suggested, rented a house with many rooms in order to sublease some part of the house, “in order to obtain extra income.”²³⁴ Simultaneously, *empleados* lived in houses with specific characteristics. *Hombres sin Presente* by Osorio-Lizarazo, for example, illustrated this point by describing an *empleado* house “demanded by their social status” as follows:

... dos alcobas, una para el matrimonio y otra para los niños. Después en frente el comedor, más adentro la cocina, otra patiecillo de cuatro metros, un lugar para la muchacha del servicio. Había otro cuarto para la ropa sucia. Este era muy pequeño. Así se distribuía la casa de César Albarran igual a todas las casas de empleados.²³⁵

Empleados also had their own ideas about the value of socially segregated neighborhoods. As early as 1936, a white-collar union published an article

²³³Contraloría General de la República, *Condiciones económico sociales de la clase media en Bogotá*, 61.

arguing “. . . that *empleados* needed specific houses to live in.”²³⁶ According to this article, housing “could ensure that the middle-class heritage be preserved” for *empleado* children. The author argued that the neighborhood where children grew up “was crucial to setting *empleados* apart from *obreros*.” *Empleado* children should “not have relationships in a neighborhood with *obrero* children “because they would endanger “the middle-class status of *empleados* children.”²³⁷ If the children of *empleados* started to associate with *obreros*, it could have “terrible social consequences” because,

. . . los compañeros del niño influyen de manera decisiva sobre su educación y por regla general las relaciones de vecindad donde se encuentran el vestido, los juguetes, alguna holgura, y la comodidad de una casa de un empleado y su familia no se puede mezclar con la estrechez e incomodidad de la de los obreros. El empleado más o menos acomodado, debe mantener el orgullo y el aire de superioridad que su hijo debe adoptar para el vecino mal vestido que no tiene los mismos juguetes, no frecuenta una escuela y no sale a pasear los domingos.²³⁸

These problems could be solved, accordingly, if *empleado* neighborhoods were physically separated from *obrero* neighborhoods. This very real social distance could be seen in the study published in 1946 by *Contraloría General de la República*. The study showed how Bogota’s neighborhoods tended to be

²³⁴ *Ibid.*

²³⁵ Osorio-Lizarazo, *Hombres sin presente*, 45.

²³⁶ “Los Barrios para empleados,” *Senderos*, 3, Nos. 16 and 17 (May and June 1936): 2-3.

²³⁷ *Ibid.*

²³⁸ Contraloría General de la República, *Anuario Municipal de Estadística* (Bogotá: Ediciones Contraloría, 1946), 32.

organized “according to social status.”²³⁹ *Empleados* tended to live, or at least tried to find a place, “far way from *obreros*” because, according to them, “poverty was something contagious and very dangerous.”²⁴⁰

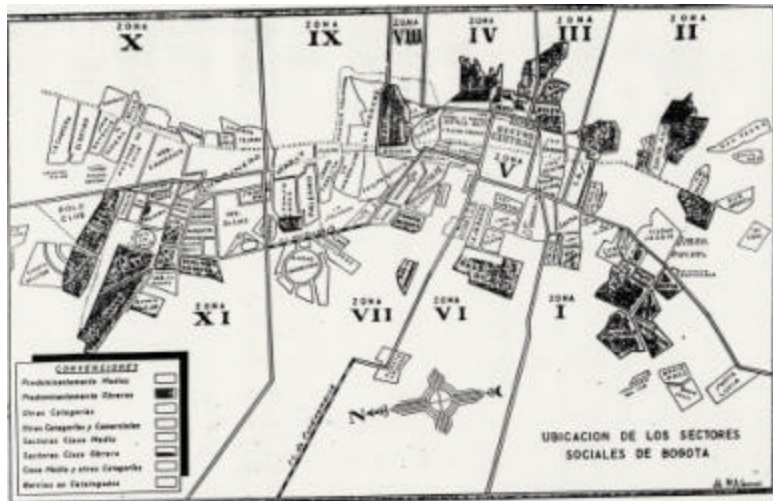


Illustration 1. Bogotá, Social Class and Barrios. Source: Contraloría General de la República, “*Las Condiciones económico-sociales de la clase media en Bogotá*, 129.

The municipal administration in 1940 started to finance *barrios* (Neighborhoods) for *empleados* based on these ideas.²⁴¹ Those efforts allowed *empleados* to think seriously about the role of housing in the formation of their middle-class identities. First, housing loans were issued in order to provide the “right houses for *empleados*.”²⁴² As Illustration 2 and 3 show, the *Instituto de Crédito Territorial* built single-family dwelling units with several bedrooms, a

²³⁹ *Ibid.*, 42.

²⁴⁰ “Barrios para empleados,” *Senderos*, 2-3.

²⁴¹ For example Instituto de Crédito Territorial, *Banco Central Hipotecario*. Basically, the law of 1939 initiated the building of *empleado* neighborhoods separated from *obreros* neighborhoods. Some *barrios* planned as an *empleados barrios* were Centro Antonio Nariño, Alcazares, and Paulo VI.

²⁴² Acuerdo Número 4, 8 September, 1955. “Por la cual se adjudica casas para empleados por el Instituto de Crédito Territorial, in *El Instituto de Crédito Territorial. Obras y proyectos*, (Bogotá: El Instituto, 1949), 37.

living room, and a garage for *empleados* families while model *obrero* housing was the fourplex . Unfortunately, it is difficult to establish how many *empleados* were able to buy a home or to get a housing loan. Still, many other studies carried out by government agencies which sponsored the construction demonstrated the cultural and social perceptions *empleados* created around the role of the house.

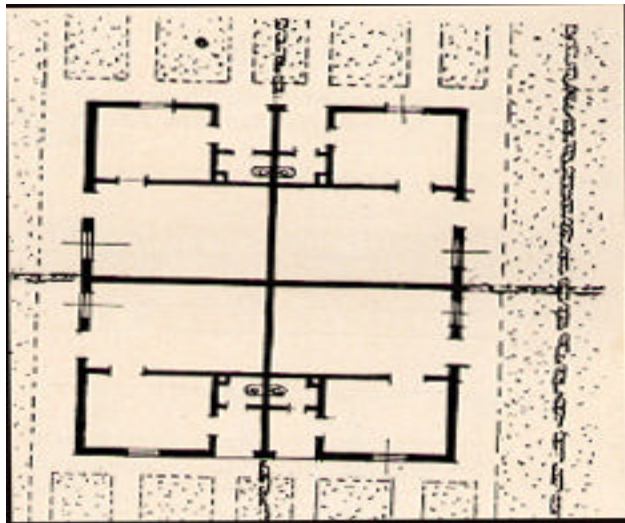


Illustration 2: *Obreros'* housing (sample) Source: Centro Nacional de Estudios de la Construcción, Inversión y Crédito del Banco Central Hipotecario, 1932-1976 (Bogotá: CENAC, 1976), 34-45.

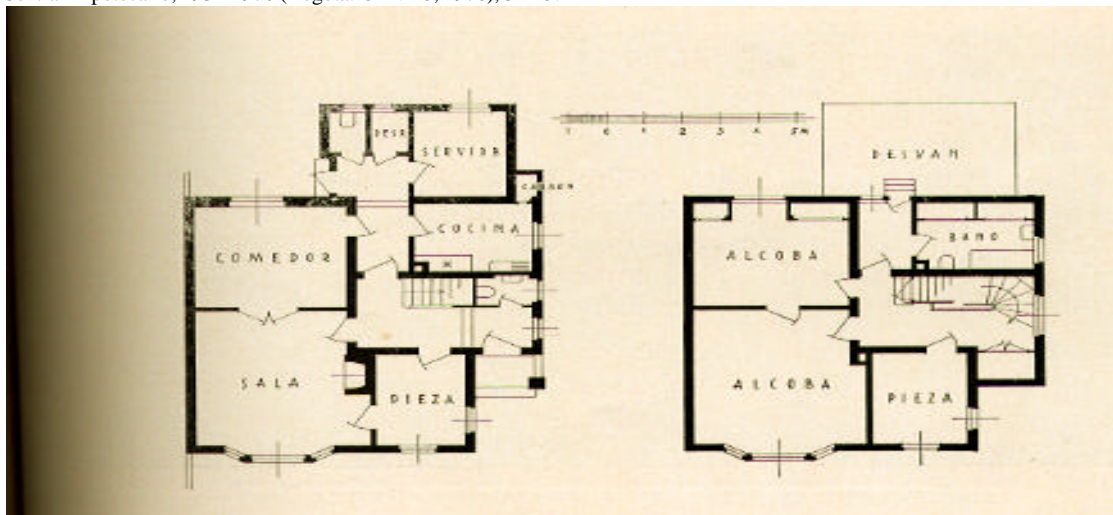


Illustration 3: *Empleados'* housing. (sample). Source: Centro Nacional de Estudios de la Construcción, Inversión y Crédito del Banco Central Hipotecario, 1932-1976 (Bogotá: CENAC, 1976), 34-45.

The first characteristic that *empleados* valued was “a space, without richness or poorness, just enough to live well.”²⁴³ They wanted a “house where home life could take place in happiness,” in contrast to *obreros* houses “where everything was a mess.”²⁴⁴ Surprisingly, *empleados* created the idea that their houses were very different from *obreros* because “*empleados* did keep the houses as houses and not as war camps.”²⁴⁵ The house was the most important place to keep up appearances and avoid “becoming the object of gossip.” In addition to the external dynamics of *empleado* housing, *empleados families* also socially constructed the interiors of their homes. In a letter from an *empleado* wife to the *Instituto de Crédito Territorial* in 1948, one may see the specific cultural assumption assigned to both the house and the space within it. The writer argued that the amount of space in the house was the crucial point to *empleados* because they “not only lived in there, but also used it as the space to feed the social relationships.”²⁴⁶

Consequently, space and its arrangement were the keys because “*empleados* usually invited friends” to show their material success and the house was the ideal place to do so.²⁴⁷ The *empleado* wife asked for a house with specific characteristics:

²⁴³ Ibid., 390.

²⁴⁴ Ibid.

²⁴⁵ Ibid., 2-3.

²⁴⁶ Ibid., 285.

²⁴⁷ Ibid.

. . . la intimidad del hogar de los empleados, la intimidad exigida por su estatus social debe ser el canon primario para construir las casas. Especial atención debe colocarse a la distribución de la sala y los cuartos o dormitorios. Por ejemplo, desde la sala no se pueden ver los dormitorios, por una sencilla razón, la sala es la parte donde se muestra la clase social y los dormitorios es el lugar privado donde se conserva tal estatus. En muchas ocasiones me ha ocurrido que voy a casa de amigas y uno ve como la señora esta aún en ropa de entre casa, dañando así su imagen social. Además, lo ideal sería que la ama de casa y los ocupantes de la familia pudiera moverse dentro de la casa sin causar ninguna molestia a los visitantes.²⁴⁸

Empleados, then, not only sought a house in a specific place in the city, away from *obreros*, but also wanted a house as a “home,” where “the social status” of the middle class could be maintained, and the desired social standard could be affected without being “the subject of the gossip.”

Finally, *empleados* identified as another crucial difference between themselves and *obreros*. Again, the 1946 *Contraloría General de la República* study showed that in 1942 *obrero* families were fortunate if they could keep children out of the workplace long enough to finish primary school. By contrast, *empleados* believed that education was the “only way to be someone in life.” The study showed that family budgets reflected this belief and made educational spending a must for *empleados*. Although the cost of instruction and education rose 90 percent in 1942, *empleados* sacrificed other budget items in order to satisfy this “obvious need.”²⁴⁹ *Empleados* spent almost 20 percent of their total budget on the education of their children.²⁵⁰ To send children to primary and secondary

²⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 293.

²⁴⁹ Contraloría General de la República, *Condiciones económico-sociales de la clase media en Bogotá*, 93.

²⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 87.

schools and in the best case scenario to a university, were seen as essential to the successful maintenance of middle class-status. Again, this economic difference had its cultural and social explanation. A story published in an *empleado* magazine argued that education was the “key to being a member of the middle class” because it was the way to differentiate them from both *ricachones* and *borers*. To be someone in life was not related “to money at all.” To be somebody in life and to “struggle successfully for the right place in society” depended on, according to *empleados*, “the education and culture you had received.” *Empleados* thought that the best inheritance left from father to sons to ensure the preservation of their social status was “education, which gives one position, knowledge, and social difference.”²⁵¹

“El hogar: un estado en miniatura”: (The Home: A Small State)

Empleados had many material expectations and cultural practices that they hoped would successfully distinguish them from “other social classes.” Nevertheless, as noted, they always felt that family budgets limited their “social need” to preserve their social status. *Empleados* experienced, therefore, economic, cultural, and even moral dilemmas in living up to their ideal. Success required a virtual war footing to mobilize the whole family and its resources. While *empleados* were the “heads of the state,” wives were the principal tacticians in the

²⁵¹ACGR, Box: Estudios Laborales, Folder: L90I, “Los empleados y la educación,” 432-453, 1943, typescript.

ground struggle. Wives were responsible for ensuring the cleanliness of the home, nutrition, the moral rectitude of the children, and the harmony and coordination of furniture. This division of labor was as much as economic as patriarchal. How to spend money, how often go to the supermarket, where to buy goods, how to manage the family budget, and how to bring up the children were duties assigned to wives not only as a patriarchal obligation but also as an essential struggle to maintain status in the social hierarchy. Wives had a crucial role to play between home and market in defending the middle-class status of *empleado* families. Their goal was to preserve the small world of the family and ensure its economic vitality through proper activities and practices for every member of the family. Osorio Lizarazo described this situation as follows:

. . . las mujeres no puede dilapidar el dinero. Ella debe organizar el gasto mensual según el número de hijos, lo distribuye. Yo[el empleado] le daré el dinero para que lo distribuya. Ella sabrá hacer la necesaria distribución. Mantendrá la casa ordenada, armónica y limpia. . . la señora preocupará hacer bien su distribución: 25 pesos diarios; 40 centavos en el desayuno, 50 en el almuerzo 50 de comida, total unos cuarenta y aún queda lo del carbón, la leche para los niños, los pasajes para el tranvía, los paquete mensuales para los cigarrillos. Buen gasto, buena clase, concluyo ella.²⁵²

Only if the *empleado's* wife properly exercised her role, could the family's moral, intellectual, physical, and material well-being be assured normal middle-class status. In a story published in 1945 in an *empleado* magazine, for example, one may see how essential the wife's role was. This was a story about the wife of a "modest *empleado* in a ministry office who had three children." She was able to

give the “buena vida (good life)” to the family on her husband’s “modest income.” Still that was very difficult because “she had to invent many strategies to keep the social status she wanted her family to continue to have as middle-class people.”²⁵³ “Her abilities and intelligent organization proved to be the key to living well.” Her preoccupation was always with “. . . dressing her children, with pride and honor.” Sometimes there were difficult moments and she had to improve her obligation as “a good wife.” If at the end of the month, there was not enough food, with “her intelligence, she made these moments less difficult because she served with flowers and placed a good cloth on the table that made everybody forget that there was a problem.”²⁵⁴

Wives, as an *empleado* magazine put it, had to strive to create “the ideal middle-class home.” In fact, *empleado* manuals and magazines announced lectures for *empleado* wives to ensure “successful home economics.” Such lectures introduced not only a new vocabulary for and skills in home economics, but also new social conceptions about household work and the wife’s role in relation to class status. According to the *empleados*, wives were the responsible for assuring “happy relationships, health, wise use of money, proper child development, well spent leisure, wise use of time, and a livable house.”²⁵⁵ Those responsibilities were central to the struggle to “keep social status, dignity the family, insure the

²⁵² Osorio-Lizarazo, *Hombres sin presente*, 67.

²⁵³ ACGR, Box: Temas laborales de interés general, Folder: LI8, “Empleados y la economía doméstica,” 45-85, 1945, typescript.

²⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 23-32.

²⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 33-44.

middle-class legacy,”²⁵⁶ and place themselves in the right position in the social hierarchy.

Lectures sponsored by white-collar unions and *empleados*, therefore, stressed the idea that work in the home was fundamental to class maintenance. Magazines published constant advice on how “to keep house for *empleado* status.” During the 1940s and 1950s wives received advice about on how to manage their time at home, how to organize housekeeping, and how to handle the family budget properly. Social status in the “public sphere” depended on the wife’s work at home. Significantly, there was specific space for public matters and another for private concerns. Rather, there was a seamless relationship between those two spheres in the creation of *empleado* identity. Wives made this relationship possible and removed the boundaries between public and private life in order to identify themselves as middle-class. As a magazine article in the late 1950s remarked,

... es la mujer la que debe confeccionar el presupuesto de la familia del empleado; a ella le corresponde distribuir los gastos; destinará el tiempo necesario a la limpieza y arreglo del hogar; pensará cada noche en el trabajo del siguiente día y en la forma de realizarlo. Anotará los gastos diarios. Registrará las entradas y las salidas en el presupuesto familiar. De ella dependerá totalmente la situación social y económica.”²⁵⁷

Wives, therefore, were pivotal in *empleado* families. Despite their best efforts, however, *empleado* families and their industrious wives could not always make ends meet. They, therefore, had to find “additional” sources of income. It

²⁵⁶ Ibid., 45.

was precisely at that point that the economic, moral and cultural imperatives diverged. On the one hand, wives had to be at home; but on the other, women had to go into the labor force to “satisfy the material expectations *empleados* could not meet by means of their incomes.” As a result, *empleados* had to experience the contradiction between the moral and cultural goal of keeping their wives at home and the need to “allow” their wives to work in offices. Morally, it was “a catastrophe for middle-class people.” Materially, it was “the only possible way to reach the [desired] social status.”²⁵⁸

²⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 23-32.

²⁵⁸ Gomez Picon, *45 relatos de un burócrata con cuatro parentesis*, 45. It is necessary to say that women thought that to work in the office was the best opportunity they had. According to oral histories, *empleadas* remembered these historical transformations as “the best time I ever lived.” It did not mean, however, that women disappeared from the workplace. Rather, women began to experience two labor journeys, one at home and one at the office. These new circumstances made male *empleados* think that women were “doubly important” because women had the role of maintaining social status from work at home and at the office; although *empleados* thought that their incomes were more important, *empleadas* income became essential to support the middle-class status materially. As a Consuelo Fernández said, “. . . yo no sé como hacía pero lo hacía, me despertaba a las cuatro de la mañana, hacía almuerzo y desayuno para todos, llevaba al jardín y al colegio a los niños que entraban a las siete, cogía para el trabajo, hora pico, hacia las cosas a una velocidad increíble, a la salida recogía a los niños, el del jardín siempre pagaba media hora más para que me lo cuidarán, llegaba a la casa como a las siete, y ponga a hacer la comida, a veces dejaba para el almuerzo, de una vez, y al otro día lo mismo . . . los fines de semana pues arreglaba toda la casa, lavaba, planchaba, bueno era sólo trabajo, dicen que las mujeres tienen más opciones ahora, pero mire, es que uno ya se vuelve un reloj de cuerda, para mí ha sido importante trabajar, pero me gustaría estar un poco más suelta, más libre, que todo es de carrera, que te acuestes, que te levantes, y en eso se te va la vida: trabajando. Pero sin el trabajo aquí y allá, uno no se puede mantener. Es la única forma de llegar a ser alguien en la vida. Mira, si la mujer no trabaja, es muy difícil darle estudio a los niños, sacarlos adelante, pero igual tienes que seguir educándolos con los mejores valores morales y sociales. No puedes dejar nada sin hacer.” Consuelo Fernandez, interview by author, July 2000, Bogotá, Colombia, tape recording. Estela Pineda also said, “. . . empezar a trabajar fue sentirme libre, poder hacer lo que yo quisiera, ir a estudiar, era muy chevere, tener mi plata, y gastarla, en lo que quisiera, y en cualquier momento uno podía independizarse del todo, pero eso sería mucho después, pero el trabajar en una empresa importante era saber que uno era capaz, demostrar que de nosotros dependía mucho seguir viviendo con alguna holgura, no sólo por la plata que hacemos ahora, pero por las responsabilidades que teníamos en casa.” Estela Pineda, interview by author, July 2000, Bogotá, Colombia, tape recording.

According to the 1946 *Contraloría* study, *empleados* in Bogotá augmented their incomes by as much as 14.2 percent over their salaries. That extra income came from subleasing rooms in the houses they rented, from small businesses, gifts, pawnshop visits, and labor union aid. Such extra income also marked *empleado* identities. They were always worried because “the salary was not enough to live according to our social status.”²⁵⁹



Table 8: Income distribution. Source: Contraloría General de la República, *Costo de vida*. 85

It was not uncommon for *empleados* to seek people to lend them money, or shops where they could pawn household items in order to meet their material desires. César Albarran in late 1930s, for example, was worried because his son’s baptism was coming and he “did not have enough money to celebrate it properly.”²⁶⁰ By going to some friends and pawn shops, the *empleado* was able to “find some money that would have to be covered the next month’s salary

²⁵⁹ Quintana Pereyra, *La redención de la clase media*, 30.

²⁶⁰ Osorio-Lizarazo, *Hombres sin presente*, 45.

arrived.” César’s dealings enabled him to “give a party for his son according to social class.”²⁶¹

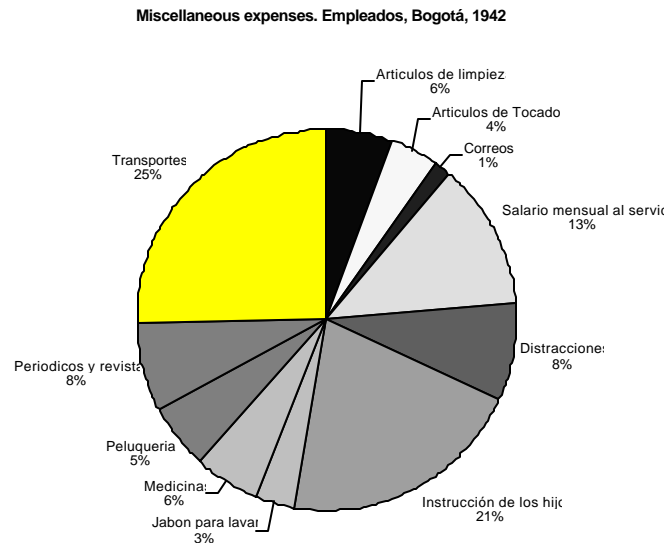


Table 9: Miscellaneous expenses: Source: Contraloría General de la República, *Costo de Vida*, 89

Some contemporary authors argued that the most quintessential characteristic of the *empleado* was having “culebras (financial worries) all the time. Pay one bill get another one.”²⁶² Such authors showed how *empleados* obtained many loans from “loan sharks” and bought many material goods through informal credit. As Gómez Picón remarked in late 1940s,

... todos los empleados tiene culebras, tiene un turco, que le presta, le vende y le ayuda a crear su ficción social. El día de los pagos, seguro el turco estaba allá haciendos sus cobros. Si no nos endeudamos, dice el empleado no tenemos nada. Los clubes, los vestidos, la ropa interior, el calzado, en fin diversos articulos, se podrían surtir solo a través de las

²⁶¹ Ibid., 65.

²⁶² Gómez Picon, *45 relatos de un burocrata con cuatro paréntesis*, 27.

deudas, y así hacerse diferente de las gentes miserables. Los empleados soportamos las deudas porque ellas nos visten bien, nos dan caché, estatus y diferencia.”²⁶³

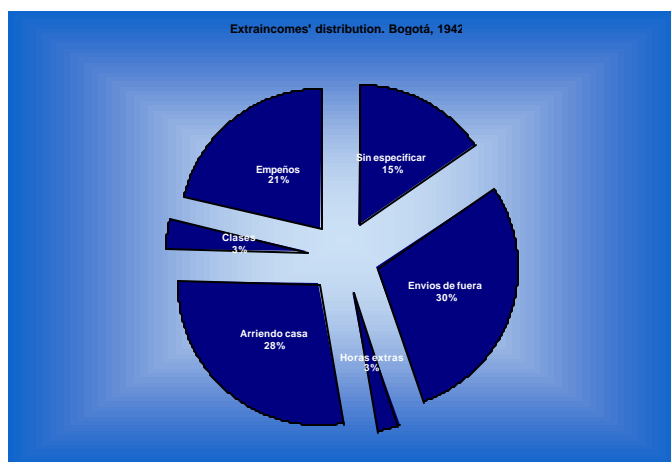


Table 10: Extra incomes. Source: Contraloría General de la República, *Costo de Vida*, 89

Empleados also exercised another strategy. They read manual, and magazines issued by their companies. These sources were essential for them because they counseled them on how to “spent money properly,” and because “. . . they stipulated the ways to keep up the appearances without enough money.”²⁶⁴ Some scholars may see these sources as a means for controlling *empleados*’ lives. Others may interpret them as ideal sources for measuring the “civilization process.”²⁶⁵ Regardless, these books were also a welcomed source

²⁶³ Ibid., 18. Suggestively, a legal advertisement published in *Guía del Comercio* said in 1943, “¿Eres empleado y tienes un sin número de deudas con los turcos? ¿Te endeudaste comprando el regalo a tu novia, el vestido para el bautismo de tu hijo o pediste dinero prestado para terminar el mes?; ¿Los intereses que esos usureros [turcos] te están acabando? No lo dudes toma asesoría legal para saber a ciencia cierta como debes manejar los problemas financieros.” Bogotá, *Guía del comercio*, 35.

²⁶⁴ ACGR, Box: Temas laborales de interés general, Folder: LI8, “Empleados y la economía doméstica,” 23-82, 1945, typescript.

²⁶⁵ See a recent study by Zandra Pedraza, *El cuerpo y el alma: visiones de progreso y de la felicidad* (Bogotá: Departamento de Antropología, Universidad de los Andes, 1999).

utilized by *empleados* of the middle class to achieve their material and cultural needs. The magazines provided *empleados* with hope and advice to follow about how to construct life as a member of the middle class “who had to be in the middle with not a lot of money but with something.” Those sources helped *empleados* to withstand their cultural and economic dilemmas. With tight budgets, *empleados* used the advice in those magazines in order to learn how to spend and save money, and keep up the appearances to “continue being middle class.”²⁶⁶ One *empleado* magazine story, for example, related a tale of two families that earned exactly the same money. One family “was able to afford many material things” that “would give the family the right social middle-class status.” The other family acted like *ricachones*” because “they spent their money on everything without paying attention. They tried to be rich because they did not pay attention to the family’s economic equilibrium.” The first family, could be defined as “middle class because it carefully “spent its money on things which give could it the greatest cultural satisfaction and social status. They were proud of the things they bought because they give the greatest pleasure, but did not

²⁶⁶ Many memos support how *empleados* read these sources in order to understand their everyday experience. In one memo from an *empleado* to his boss he argued that, “la sesión de discusión de la semana pasada estuvo interesante. Todos los empleados se mostraron bastantes interesados en las temáticas que tratan estos nuevos manuales y la utilidad que puede tener en cada una de nuestras casas. A continuación le envío un resumen de los puntos más sobresalientes tratados en la última discusión: ¿Cómo vivir bien sin mucho dinero?; ¿ Cómo manejar el presupuesto debidamente?; Las cosas materiales son importantes; la familia y la economía.” ACGR, Box: Temas laborales de interés general, Folder: LI8, “Empleados y la economía doméstica,” 45-85, 1945, typescript.

bankrupt them.”²⁶⁷ Such magazine article along with home economics manuals helped *empleados* overcome the economic dilemmas they faced by arguing that affording the material goods of the middle class was not only a question of having money, but also a matter of knowing how to manage a tight budget.

On balance, *empleados* exercised material and cultural strategies to distinguish themselves from those above and those below. My research indicates that *empleado* identities were not marked by trying to imitate the upper classes but rather by seeking to distance themselves from the *obrero* class. Perhaps not all sections of the middle class constructed their identities in relationships to those they placed below them in their hierarchical conceptualized social order; nevertheless, *empleados* did whatever possible to be differentiated from the working class and adopted many strategies in social, economic and cultural terms which, according to *empleados*, contributed to situating themselves higher in the social hierarchy.

²⁶⁷Ibid., 23-32.

Final Reflections:

The history presented here focused on how *empleados* constructed their middle class identities through a combination of historical structures and everyday life. The class identity that *empleados* created was not an abstraction; rather, it was a process that they, as historical actors, created, constructed, experienced, contested, and shaped in their everyday experience. They created their own class language, their own material practices, and their own cultural understandings to differentiate themselves from both those whom they called *obreros* and those whom they called *ricachones*.

Urbanization, industrialization, and expansion of the service sector created new social spaces in which the historical differences between those who worked in factories and those who worked in offices influenced *empleado* identity construction. *Empleados* assigned social and cultural meanings to what it meant to be an *empleado* in the workplace and home. Gendered work, impersonal labor relationships, personal appearance, new conceptualizations of family dynamics, diet, housing, education, and domestic service became some of the historical-cultural manifestations *empleados* brought into the social game to construct the meaning of belonging to the middle class.

While the evidence presented here stresses agency and identity construction among Bogotá's *empleados* and *empleadas*, this thesis, nevertheless, leaves some questions unanswered. We need to decipher, for example, the significance of political beliefs, affiliations, and positions. Specifically, if

empleados did whatever possible to be distinguished from *obreros*, was this “social need” reflected also in their political identities? Did *empleados* seek to differentiate themselves from *obreros* politically? Did *obreros* and *empleados* share some political identities in both the everyday experience and political structures? To answer those questions, the social historian must look at how these political identities were an outcome of the combination of “high-politics” and the great power of everyday life experience. Historians need to address political history not solely from the perspective well-organized labor unions and parties. Furthermore, historians cannot understand political history only from the micropolitics of human relations. Taken separately, those approaches cannot explain the historical dilemma experienced by *empleados* as a part of the middle class. To address this gap it will be necessary to look at how individual and collective social relationships influenced middle-class political identities.

Suggestively, during the late 1930s Quintana Pereyra argued in *Redención de la clase media* that, middle class people had “a political position in the labor unions and another, widely different in the workplace, at home, and everywhere else.”²⁶⁸ Might we understand these differences as apolitical positions? Should we continue looking for a coherent or single political attitude? Might we talk about a heterogeneous political identities? Tentatively, my answer is an emphatic yes. It is crucial to ask how these people who called themselves middle class

²⁶⁸ Quintana Pereyra, *La redención de la clase media*, 23.

created their own multiple, diverse, contradictory, and perhaps divisive political identities.

Additionally, while women were thought of as crucial to maintaining the middle-class status, first as a mother and wife, and second as a “helper” to reach the material success, a more detailed analysis has to be done of how these historical transformations influenced both female and male identities. Perhaps, in this way we can reconstruct the unstable boundaries between public and private life and understand how, historically, these actors understood their specific changing social order.

Finally, we need to compare *empleado* experiences to those of other people who also called themselves middle class. Only then we will be able to understand the complexity of the middle class’s historical role. As a long research project, I will continue inquiring into the formation of the highly differentiated middle class identities that have created, defined, and influenced the dynamism of the urban centers in the social, political and economic history of Colombia and Latin America during the twentieth century.

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