

‘My Mother Told Me’: Two Women’s Point of View on Home and Work

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I take the analytical category of point of view from literary criticism, and use it to understand how an individual’s life story is socially constituted. The article focuses on interviews carried out with a worker from a small mill town and a teacher in Mexico City, both of them born at the start of the 20th century. I try to understand how class and gender, on the one hand, and inherited values and new experiences, on the other, have shaped their social relationships and their worldviews. Each woman is quite different from the other, as their points of view reveal, and yet they coincide in a very critical understanding of their society – a critical stance they have passed on to the next generation.

Oral historians are aware that the story resulting from an interview reflects a point of view. Consequently, we often insist on the importance of collecting several and different views on the same historical episode. Our purpose may be that of obtaining complementary stories, figuring that each point of view offers a part of the whole; or obtaining diversity, considering that each constitutes a particular version of the whole. Whether we pursue one or another aim, our idea is to collect and present several points of view in order to bridge the distance between the singularity of the individual story and the universality of the historical event. But we may pursue the individual point of view by itself as a way into social history, because it integrates values and codes elaborated and recognized within a social collective.¹

Point of view, as an analytic category, comes from literary criticism.² It is used to classify the position and extent of partiality in narrative voices. Point of view may also be used as a tool to understand the relationship between story and consciousness, which is the reason why I’m interested in using the concept to inquire into life stories. In the course of an interview, an interviewee establishes a point of view in reference to the interviewer but also in reference to an imagined audience; hence it is pertinent to ask who speaks to whom. Finally, a narrator’s

¹A first version of the present essay, “Class and gender points of view in two women’s stories of home and work”, was delivered at the 2004 Oral History Association Annual Meeting, Portland, Oregon (29 September-3 October); I am grateful to Ronald Grele for his critical commentary. A Spanish version was published in de Garay, 2007, pp. 186-204.

² M. M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981); Antonieta Eva Verwey, *Acto narrativo y punto de vista* (Querétaro: Universidad Autónoma de Querétaro, 1984).

point of view shapes both the form and the content of what is told, so we ask what is said and how.

The simultaneous relationship a narrator establishes with an audience and a story influences what he or she remembers and forgets, since there is a deliberate intention to convey a certain meaning. Moreover, a narrator also sketches a relationship with himself or herself as the life story unfolds, given that he or she changes positions and perceptions over time. An oral historian asks not only what is the narrator's point of view but how did it form and change in the course of a lifetime.

This way of approaching the issue of point of view implies attending to the dialogues that shape the story. Memories are partly the result of a dialogue across time between inherited values and new situations. It is also shaped by the points of view of others with whom by necessity we speak in the course of remembering. Therefore, what is social in oral history does not only come from adding individual perspectives, it also comes from understanding how stories are socially constituted.³ Besides, to the extent that reminiscing is the result of a dialogue in the present, oral history narratives are also constitutive of perception in the present. In other words, point of view is a window into the presence of the past in the present.

I

Altagracia was born in a small textile city, Río Blanco, in the state of Veracruz.⁴ Her mother and father migrated from different rural villages in the 1890s, attracted by the job offerings at the newly erected textile factory. Altagracia attended school for a couple of years and took care of domestic work while her parents worked. She entered the factory when she turned 14, and remained at work for the next 50 years. She started as an unskilled helper, and in the course of her work life passed through almost all of the factory's departments until she reached the most skilled job in production work, weaver, and then retired.

Her life spans most of the 20th century. But one of the interviewers, Silvia Espindola, herself a resident of Río Blanco and long-time friend of Altagracia,

³Schrager develops the idea of point of view as a way into the social dimension of oral histories: Samuel Schrager, "What is Social in Oral History?" in: Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson, eds., *The Oral History Reader* (London: Routledge, 1998), 284-299; the notion of dialogues constituting the evidence in oral history informs most of Portelli's work: Alessandro Portelli, "Oral history as Genre," in: Alessandro Portelli, *The Battle of Valle Giulia: Oral History and the Art of Dialogue* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997), 3-23; Edward Palmer Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1978) also insists on historians learning to listen the dialogues entrapped in written documents, 14-29.

⁴Altagracia Ramírez Pacheco, interviewed by Silvia Espindola and Gerardo Necochea, Río Blanco, Veracruz, July 21, 1983.

Gerardo Necochea Gracia, "My Mother Told Me': Two Women's Point of View on Home and Work," *Oral History Forum d'histoire orale* 32 (2012), Edición Especial/Special Issue "Historia Oral en América Latina/Oral History in Latin America"

chose to ask about something that happened before she was born. A lockout in the textile industry, initiated in January 1907, caused a riot in Río Blanco. History books refer to this event as a strike taking place during the strike wave of 1906-1907, and describe it as a bloody incident that anticipated the revolution of 1910.⁵ The question forced Altagracia to look back to what she was told and not to any actual events she lived through.

Silvia Espíndola: Altita, did someone tell you about events in January 7 ...

AltagraciaRamírez: Yes.

SE: about what happened?

AR: Yes, my mother told me. There, in the Ameyal, it is historic.

SE: Could you tell us...

AR: Yes.

SE: what she told you?

AR: Yes, because my mother used to say: "This is what in fact we saw."

At that time Lucrecia Toriz, the same they used to bring every time they commemorated January 7, I mean, she lived behind our house then, we had the front house and she had the back. Then she said, there was a big store there where they baked bread, a big store owned by *gachupines* [a derogatory term for Spaniards], and they were all the same as the factory owners [the factory in fact was owned by French immigrants]. They were *gachupines* and there was a bakery, a store. Then she said that, well, they used to beat them, I myself saw it, when I was hired, they used to still...

When she got to this point in her story, the mention of beatings triggered other memories. The harsh treatment by foremen, evidently one of the causes of the 1907 stoppage, still continued years later, when she started work at the factory. Her story then digressed from the strike to tell an anecdote about a foreman who beat a worker for having a bite to eat during work hours; this foreman, her female workmates explained to the young girl, was in charge of discipline. The anecdote brought forth questions from both interviewers, so for a time the original question about the 1907 strike was forgotten. Sometime later, one interviewer brought the strike back into focus.

⁵ Bernardo García Díaz, *Un pueblo fabril del porfiriato: Santa Rosa, Veracruz* (México: Secretaría de Educación Pública, Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1981); Salvador Hernández, "Tiempos libertarios. El magonismo en México: Cananea, Río Blanco y Baja California," in: Francisco González Hermosillo and Salvador Hernández Ciro Cardoso, *La clase obrera en la historia de México, vol. 3* (México: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, Siglo XXI, 1980), 101-248; Ezequiel Montes Rodríguez, *La huelga de Río Blanco* (Río Blanco: Sindicato de Trabajadores en General de la Compañía Industrial de Orizaba, 1965).

Gerardo Necochea Gracia, "My Mother Told Me': Two Women's Point of View on Home and Work," *Oral History Forum d'histoire orale* 32 (2012), Edición Especial/Special Issue "Historia Oral en América Latina/Oral History in Latin America" 3

SE: Wouldn't you tell us about the Ameyal and why it is historic?

AR: Oh, yes! Right! It is historic because there, let's see, all that was stolen, what they stole, because it was, hum... the Ameyal was a neighborhood, because there was a coffee field and in the midst of it they made a reservoir, right?, and then they laid a pipe and lots of water fell, mind you, clean water that fell there, and that is why it is, was, the Ameyal neighborhood, now it is the *colonia* Francisco I. Madero. There were no houses; there weren't any on the hill...

Her story took a turn again, this time to describe how the place was gradually urbanized, what kind of houses were built and finally comes to the point when she bought her home. Once again, and for the last time, the interviewers asked about the strike.

Gerardo Necochea: But listen, you were telling us about the Ameyal...

AR: Oh, right! Well, as you'll see...

GN: that it is a landmark because...

AR: the Ameyal, yes, well, it is well known because of that store, the one I tell you was owned by the *gachupines*, and when they demanded the eight-hour day, that's when all the killing happened and the store was burnt, and before that they were saying "They're gonna burn the store!" They went in, and some went and took clothing, and some took barrels of, well, liquor, right? I mean wine and eggnog ... So they stole, well, no, the people shared everything that was in the store, right? And when the soldiers were coming to get all that back, and I think also to punish those who had gone inside the store, it was then that close to the cellar – huh! It was razed by a flood – they were burying the barrels. All they stole, they buried it there. There, in the Ameyal.

And then Lucrecia opened up some big barrels of eggnog and wine, and she says: "Come, let's have a drink – she says – so that, so we get the strength we need to dig deep and bury what we must." And they got drunk. She got them drunk, sure, each took a glass of eggnog and then a glass of wine and soon enough we were all pretty drunk! And then Lucrecia took the lead to go inside the church and bring a banner and then she headed a march and they all went to free those in jail in Río Blanco, and then those in jail in Nogales, and then she was struck by someone with a machete when they went to free the prisoners in Santa Rosa. That's what she was doing and my mother was turned back. She was already on her way to Nogales, she said, when a woman said to her "Hey, listen! Why are you going with the others? You'll wind up in jail, she said, for doing that,

freeing the prisoners.” And so, yes, my mother turned back while the other women kept on.

They all lived there in the Ameyal. Yes. And later, the other women told my mother: “you should’ve gone. Imagine, she said, when Lucrecia went to open the jail in Santa Rosa she was beaten.” That happened to Lucrecia Toriz, that’s why every year they bring her up there [to the commemoration], because she was getting the prisoners out of jail. Yes, that’s what I tell you... it all happened, let’s see... in 1907, and I was born a year later, in 1908.

Altagracia’s description offers scanty information about what went on that January 7. She is quite generous, instead, with evidence about the transmission of memory. Her story shows how the elaboration and conservation of reminiscences begin in the act of conversation. The story exists because the mother told his daughter and Altagracia in turn retold it during the interview, although Silvia’s questions make clear that Altagracia had previously told the story to others. Furthermore, the original story took shape as Altagracia’s mother talked to her neighbors, who filled in the gaps about events she did not witness. This particular way of remembering is important because personal memory thus shaped incorporates other points of view.⁶ It is likely that what Altagracia recounts is different from what her mother originally said to her, but veracity does not lie in the details of the story but in the values and ideas expressed that were collectively constructed.⁷ I want to focus here on the transmission of only two of those values, solidarity and independence.

Altagracia introduces her story by asserting the historical importance of the place and the events that took place there. Indeed, the riot links local history to national history. Her story, however, does not take on the epic style of the grand history, preferring instead the intimate gaze of a group of women neighbors close to the action. The women move together, as they are encouraged and led by Lucrecia Toriz, another neighbor. There is a sense of solidarity born out of the fact they all are women and live in close proximity. That feeling of community includes even Altagracia, who at a given point of the story includes herself in the action, when she states that “we were all pretty drunk.” Belonging to Río Blanco means, to her, that she was part of that day’s events and shares in the solidarity conveyed by the story.

The image of Lucrecia carrying the banner transmits the value of independence. Other parts of the story do the same but this image is the most powerful, as well as interesting because stories differ on this point. Some versions, both oral and written, refer to a flag, and at least one historian identifies

⁶ Schrager, “Social,” 287-288.

⁷ Oliver Sacks, *Un antropólogo en Marte* (Barcelona: Anagrama, 1997), 218-222.

Gerardo Necochea Gracia, “My Mother Told Me’: Two Women’s Point of View on Home and Work,” *Oral History Forum d’histoire orale* 32 (2012), Edición Especial/Special Issue “Historia Oral en América Latina/Oral History in Latin America”

the banner of a mutual aid society. Altagracia describes how Lucrecia brought the banner out of the church and then led the march into neighboring towns to free prisoners. The image Altagracia resorts to is similar to one of the best known anecdotes of the independence war that took place a century before the events described: the priest Hidalgo carrying a banner of the virgin and promising to liberate the Indians from the Spaniard's yoke. Other testimonies express the same feeling: "We felt free and owners of our own destiny after so much misery and oppression."⁸ Altagracia in this way equates the riot to the war of independence, suggesting perhaps that it was at this time that workers won, or at least fought for, their independence.

Her reminiscence goes against the commemorative tone of certain versions in written history. What eventually became the dominant public version of the event probably first appeared in the 1930s. The following brief passage, from a book published in 1940, illustrates the tone:

A batallion of rural guards came to the scene of rioting and ordered workers to disperse. Then, rising above the anonymous mass, a woman waved a red flag. Everyone was silent. She was LUCRECIA TORIZ, the people's daughter, who at that moment of affliction foresaw a bloodbath among her people, and brave like all in our race, with rough speech addressed the praetorians about to be assassinated. The commanding officer withdrew, shouting "LONG LIVE MEXICO!" That heroine had saved them from a massacre.⁹

Lucrecia Toriz appears in this version both heroic and isolated, her intervention is providential, and she carries a red flag. Workers are a stoic and anonymous mass, and if in this passage they avoid death, their destiny is that of the inanimate victim.

Altagracia alludes to this commemorative version when she introduces Lucrecia Torizas, the woman who "they used to bring every time they commemorated January 7." And then she goes on to tell a contrasting history: events are festive, women are conscious subjects, and the tone is ironic. Her picaresque style suggests she not only incorporates but criticizes both the annual ritual and the official version.

The same process of dialogue in shaping the point of view appears in another passage of the interview. Altagracia accepted a marriage proposal. She

⁸ "Entrevista a Melitón Martínez," in Angel Hermida Ruíz, *Acayucan y Río Blanco, gestas precursoras de la Revolución* (Veracruz, Dirección General de Educación, 1964), 65, cited in: García Díaz, *Pueblo*, 143.

⁹ Ana María Hernández, *La mujer mexicana en la industria textil* (México: Secretaría del Trabajo, 1940), 32.

Gerardo Necochea Gracia, "My Mother Told Me': Two Women's Point of View on Home and Work," *Oral History Forum d'histoire orale* 32 (2012), Edición Especial/Special Issue "Historia Oral en América Latina/Oral History in Latin America"

was then working at the factory and was willing to quit work to become a housewife. Several of her coworkers, all of them older than Altagracia, advised her not to quit on account that men were untrustworthy and one day she would find herself alone, penniless, and out of work. Altagracia decided to heed their advice, and in time discovered that her coworkers had been right. Although her marriage formally lasted 16 years, in practice it ended much earlier.

The anecdote reflects different understandings of marriage. It would be common sense to interpret that the young bride sees marriage with her naïve, inexperienced eyes while her seasoned coworkers speak from a well-founded cynicism. Historical sense, however, suggests another understanding of the anecdote.

The pattern of married life followed by Altagracia was common for working-class families throughout the 19th century and up to the 1930s. Irregular employment and low wages forced men and women to frequent changes of jobs and residence. Women as a rule remained in charge of children and the family was temporarily or permanently dissolved.¹⁰ That was the pattern most likely experienced, and expected, by the older women, hence the advice they offered to Altagracia. Altagracia's understanding, in turn, did not only come from her naiveté. In her own experience, her parents had a lasting union. Altagracia's mother worked while her children were young but left the factory once Altagracia started working. Furthermore, other women belonging to Altagracia's generation in fact left work and devoted themselves to home and children, a pattern that became common between 1930 and 1970, as wages rose and allowed for a family to depend on just the husband's wage. Altagracia's perspective on marriage was thus formed not only through dialogue with others at the time, that is common sense, but also through dialogue between received values and expectations and lived experience, that is historical sense.

This historical sense is unveiled again when Altagracia underlines that hers was a proper marriage. Her husband carried her away from her parents' house as an honest woman even if they married only by the church and not by civil law because, she explained, it was not the custom at the time. The unsolicited explanation about the character of her wedding may obey the need to distinguish her behavior from the contemporary rural custom of bride-stealing or common-law marriages. This is the reason why she emphasizes the search for new behaviour patterns that were according to the new and distinct urban and working-class condition. Historical sense implies the continual convergence, although not always harmonious, of inherited and lived experience.

Another influence upon what she remembered was the dialogue implied in the interview. It was a dialogue between past and present. Altagracia did not tell

¹⁰ Lanny Thompson, "Households and the Reproduction of Labor in Mexico, 1876-1970," *Ph. D. dissertation*. State University of New York at Binghamton, 1989. 216-220.

Gerardo Necochea Gracia, "My Mother Told Me': Two Women's Point of View on Home and Work," *Oral History Forum d'histoire orale* 32 (2012), Edición Especial/Special Issue "Historia Oral en América Latina/Oral History in Latin America"

spontaneously nor uninterrupted her story about 1907. She was responding to specific questions and to memory associations. It is interesting to note that, while remembering what her mother told her, at two points she went on to tell another story because she associated different events in her life, so what she recounted about one particular place and moment of her life was really interwoven with her whole life story. We are consequently led to ask when do the events she recounts begin and end.

The events she told about could have at least two starting points. One could be when Altagracia's mother told her daughter about what happened on that January 6, 1907, while the other would go back to that date or even further back. If the beginning of the story pushes back into the past, its ending extends toward the present. The first time Altagracia diverted from her story was when she associated what happened in 1907 to an incident she witnessed once she was employed in the factory, concerning the persistent physical mistreatment of workers by supervisors. The second, shorter diversion occurred when she told about how the neighborhood was settled and how she acquired her house. The temporal distance between these occurrences spans pretty much the length of her lifetime, so in her memory, the events of 1907 are present throughout her life. To be free of supervision and to own a house were other forms of valuing independence, while her reminiscence about physical mistreatment highlighted the tension between collective and individual responses to work situations.

I have already pointed to the relationship between perception and narrative style as it appeared in the description of events in 1907. The implicit criticism expressed through irony and picaresque became explicit later on as Altagracia referred to the union and the workers.

Immediately after describing the events of 1907, and in answer to a question, Altagracia remembered the friction between Río Blanco and the nearby Santa Rosa (today Ciudad Mendoza), sparked by a disagreement about interurban buses. Santa Rosa had loaned three passenger buses to Río Blanco, but due to a financial disagreement, later took back the buses. It was then, Altagracia said, that the workers met at a union assembly and decided to establish their own service of urban buses. "When they took that agreement, they said yes, sure but how much, since we earned little and they took one day's pay to buy the buses. They bought one, and then bought another with the same agreement, and another. And then continued to do so, to buy buses and more buses for Río Blanco, and they took from our paychecks to buy buses that serve all the people in the town." In this recollection, she emphasized the solidarity of workers with the rest of the community.

Altagracia followed this story by a contrasting reflection on the path followed by union leaders:

Because we had true representatives before, people who did not sell out workers' rights to the company. They defended us. Just as they chose, let's say, really apt individuals, there were also union presidents who fought for the workers' interests. Not anymore. Today, the bosses give them crumbs, and they come telling us "well, *compañeros*, I'm going to, ahm... well, I mean, read to you what we did get, because we couldn't win all for this and the other reason". And they fool the nitwits, all those pretending so hard to be smart and in fact showing how really dumb they are, and end up believing such sweet-talk.

Altagracia ends this passage with an anecdote about a guy who was her assistant and who she every so often punished with her broom:

...because I would ask him to clean and ready the thread so that I could work, meet my production quota, and he would instead steal the thread. I said to him:

--Isn't that nice of you? You just take my thread and go do your own work.

--No, it's only the bobbin, and they're broken. The point is to make money without working.

Even now, every time I see him I say to him: the point is to make money without working. I ran into him the other day, he's now a supervisor and I said: the point is to make money without working. He built himself a big house, who knows how much money he put into it. And they say they don't steal.

This anecdote cuts across time, and it was partly an explanation for the present corruption of leaders and partly an illustration of the continuing tension between solidarity and individualism.

Altagracia told the story of her life at a given present moment and she did so from a perspective shaped by accumulated experience. The story as a whole was told from that point of view. At the same time, what she remembered enabled us to understand how such a life perspective was formed and transformed. The point of view expressed in the present contains accumulated past experience, which in turn is a way to understand how the present contains the past, and consequently understanding that the study of the present requires a historical perspective, just as the study of the past cannot lose sight of how the past extends into the present.

II

Let us now turn our attention to another woman, a contemporary of Atagracia but born in Mexico City. Concepción Millán was born in 1906.¹¹ Early in her childhood, her parents moved to a town not far from the city, hoping to avoid the revolutionary war that broke out in 1910. The family in fact moved about neighboring towns for a while, and sometime later Concepción's father died. She did not go into detail about her father but rather directed her tale to how poverty struck her and her mother and how she went to live and study with nuns. As a young woman, she went back to Mexico City and worked as a school teacher. Later, she got a job in a public school, and was consequently able to get an apartment in the Multifamiliar Miguel Aleman, a federal housing complex built for government employees. She moved there a short time after inauguration in 1949, acting on a friend's advice who said the place was nice and inexpensive. At the time, Concepción had a daughter and lived with her mother. The three women moved from the crowded central district to the undeveloped southern edge of the city. Concepción still lived there when she was interviewed in 1999.

Concepción told two anecdotes that offered, in my opinion, the keys to understand the point of view from where she perceived the world. The first anecdote was told soon after the start of the interview, and concerned events that happened when she was a child. The second anecdote appeared near the end of the interview, and she told something that happened to her as a mature woman. Both anecdotes encapsulated the time of her life.¹²

Concepción's first anecdote referred the family's encounter with revolution. It happened at night, when a detachment from one of the opposing armies invaded her house, seeking horses and food. Evidently mother and daughter had talked afterward about the events of that night, so that Concepción's version combined her innocent, childish vision from below with the grownup vision of her mother. There are clear parallels with Altagracia's narrative, so we may compare some elements.

Concepción did not resort to the ironic tone and the picaresque style but there was a critical sense. She started by describing an intimate peaceable scene: the family after dinner, the little one getting ready to go to sleep, "my little bed had been fixed for me to lie down." We imagine a candle stick dimly illuminating the house in contrast to the deep darkness outside. And from that darkness came an aggressive knocking at the door, loud demands for horses, and finally, soldiers

¹¹ Concepción Millán, interviewed by Graciela de Garay and Concepción Martínez, Mexico City, 12 March 1998, PHO 13/13-1(2), Instituto Mora.

¹² See Necoechea, "Parientes, amigos y pares: tres anécdotas para pensar el siglo XX," in *Después de vivir un siglo: ensayos de historia oral*, (México: Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, 2005), 73-88.

Gerardo Necoechea Gracia, "My Mother Told Me': Two Women's Point of View on Home and Work," *Oral History Forum d'histoire orale* 32 (2012), Edición Especial/Special Issue "Historia Oral en América Latina/Oral History in Latin America" 10

violently irrupting in the house and ransacking the kitchen. The contrast achieved by these images frames the whole anecdote. The style resembled a novel of manners in which civilization and barbarism clash, very much like nineteenth-century bandit novels in which the contrast underlined a moral lesson.

Concepción remembered how, after hearing loud knocking at the door, her father rose to go answer and she stepped on his feet and snuck between his legs. Thus installed, she observed the unfolding scene. At one point she stopped the narrative and explained that she did not see what she was about to describe: “my mother told me, I think, that those people were starved, because with dirty hands they grabbed egg-yolks and everything and ate them. An ugly sight, isn’t it? Disgusting!” The view from above, combining fear with disdain contrasted with the child’s view from below, who the next morning discovered that a little chicken, a gift from her parents, was part of the troop’s breakfast. “There I saw my little chicken, all cut up in the frying pan. I cried and I wanted to say something but my father said “no, let it be.” But why they gone and do that to my little chicken? Why?”

The different versions in Altagracia’s story occurred on the same level and were equally important. In Concepción’s story, different versions take on unequal planes and her role in the action was always subordinated. Not only was there a clash between civilization and barbarism but those involved obeyed a hierarchical order. There were no bonds of solidarity among equals and no collective subject rose above family relationships. The irruption of barbarism into the intimate family scene had the effect of distancing and impeding Concepción from identifying with the events portrayed. She watched from below and unaware of what really happened. This is the lesson the grown woman drew at the time of the interview: “I really wasn’t aware that there was going to be revolution. I knew nothing, I just watched, observed. I didn’t have the faintest idea that it was a revolution, because one doesn’t know.” Concepción’s point of view was shaped from below, as she watched how brute force did away with the fictitious safety of her private world. But it also integrated the view from above which proclaimed moral superiority over the barbarians.

Concepción as a child remained distant from the action partly because of the presence of her father. Through the whole scene, Concepción remained close, actually stuck, to her father. Near the end of the anecdote, she described how her father was forced to climb on top of a horse and follow the troops. Concepción climbed with him: “my father held me like this, carried me close to him, and since I was with father I wasn’t very scared, right?” The men had not gone very far when the mother’s uncle intervened and succeeded in getting both father and daughter released. The mother’s uncle was a doctor and had attended the commanding the officer, and for this reason successfully responded to his niece’s plea to do something. Just as Concepción depended on his father, he in turn

depended on others better situated, so in fact they all participated in a chain of exchanging favors for security.

In a fragile world it is necessary to enjoy some protection. But not all may enjoy it. This is the meaning of the second anecdote Concepción told.

She was already a resident of the housing complex, the *Multifamiliar*, when she met an artisan weaver whose house and workshop were across from the new buildings.

--So you tell me you sell cloth?

--Yes, he said, I sell it and everything. Why don't you buy, all I have left is this piece of cloth. I'm just waiting for them to come and take the house from me.

So I say – really, how come?

--Yes, he says, they are going to take it, something about opening up a street or who knows what.

--But c'mon! How can they open up?

And yes, they did widen the street and got rid of his shop.

Concepción was moved before, once again, the clash between the weak and the strong. Again, she only watched. She stood protected by her residence in the Multifamiliar. In that ceaseless and inevitable clash between the strong and the weak, she had found a safe niche that allowed her to stand outside the battle.

Concepción inherited from her parents the values that informed her point of view. But these were undoubtedly reinforced by her lived experience. Such values stood in contrast to those of Altagracia. Concepción valued dependence and Altagracia valued independence. Solidarity meant, for the former, reciprocity between non-equals while for the latter, support among equals. It follows then that their life trajectories differed not only in experiences but in the perspective from which such experiences were narrated. Altagracia focused on how a life of work gave her social recognition and made her an independent individual. Concepción, who also worked throughout her life, focused instead on how she overcame the hardships of life thanks to the intervention of others until finally she escaped difficulties owing to providentially finding herself a resident in the Multifamiliar.¹³

Many others who belonged to the first generation of residents in the Multifamiliar expressed a similar point of view in their interviews. Each referred to unique experiences and life trajectories but they all coincided in considering the housing complex as an escape from the unequal life struggle. From within this point of view, they may have expressed dislike but they neither deplored nor

¹³ I examine closely their life trajectories in “Parientes” and “Casadas con la casa y con la fábrica”, in *Después*, 173-188.

Gerardo Necochea Gracia, “My Mother Told Me’: Two Women’s Point of View on Home and Work,” *Oral History Forum d’histoire orale* 32 (2012), Edición Especial/Special Issue “Historia Oral en América Latina/Oral History in Latin America” 12

rejected dependent relationships based on exchanging favors and often involving corrupt behavior. And yet, the residents adopted the tone of moral superiority that befitted their status as decent people.¹⁴

Such a perspective does not easily admit collective concerted behavior. It takes place in few and well-ordered occasions. The residents organize a kermes on the anniversary of the Multifamiliar's inauguration, an invented tradition commemorating a supposed common origin. The celebration includes another invention: typical regional food divested of any association to specific places and situations. The events of January 7, 1907 in Río Blanco, on the contrary and even after two generations, have not lost their specificity in regards to people, places and actions, and for that reason the celebratory ritual is not exempt from disputes about the meaning of what happened. In Río Blanco, as Altagracia described it, events were a consequence of shared lives and solidarity. In the Multifamiliar, instead, the celebration aims to bring about the feeling of collectivity.¹⁵

III

The comparison between Altagracia and Concepción shows how the same cultural elements follow different routes at a given point in time and social space. The 1910 revolution is, without a doubt, a foundational moment for twentieth-century Mexico, and in a way both women start their life with it. Both express ambiguity but each has a different way of appropriating and weighing the symbol. Altagracia judges positively what happened in 1907 but is skeptical, critical, and even rebellious about the consequences. The cardboard commemoration and the union's bureaucratization are part of the same problematic present. For Concepción, the revolution is comparable to the barbarism that must be left behind, even though she has benefitted from the ensuing welfare state. The point of view from which each woman observes her life at the time of the interview has changed; consequently, both differ in their attitude toward the surrounding social situation.

The differences between them stem from social class. It is not only a question of different incomes or professional careers but of different modes of cultural appropriation. Any given society, twentieth-century Mexico in this case, has a common cultural reservoir but the objects and symbols at hand are

¹⁴ Gerardo Necochea Gracia, "Puerto del favor, isla del derecho," in: Graciela de Garay, ed., *Modernidad habitada: Multifamiliar Miguel Alemán, ciudad de México, 1949-1999* (México: Instituto Mora, 2004), 103-136.

¹⁵ This comment describes only the experience of the first generation of residents in the Multifamiliar, and the second relates to the community differently. See Patricia Pensado Leglise, "Identidad y reconstrucción de una historia común en el Centro Urbano Presidente Alemán," in: Graciela de Garay, ed., *Modernidad habitada: Multifamiliar Miguel Alemán, ciudad de México, 1949-1999* (México: Instituto Mora, 2004), 165-189.

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appropriated and signified differently. This process, as Roger Chartier points out, creates signifying collectives.¹⁶ Such collectives correspond with social class, in the wide definition of the term used by the new social history, the necessary reference being of course E. P. Thompson.¹⁷

One aspect constitutive of class, in that wide sense, is precisely the cultural process that shapes point of view. The dynamic of this process resides in the relation between an inherited way of life and the changing situations that mold lived experience. The anecdotes told by Altagracia and Concepción display the values acquired through socialization, and how these inform perception while at the same time being modified by the experience of actual situations. In this process, residual cultural elements confront dominant culture and provide a critical perspective that is potentially oppositional, although eventually such critical perspective may be incorporated to the dominant culture.¹⁸

Both women take a critical stand toward their world. Altagracia is conscious that the notion of independence is undermined by the union's actions even though the latter emerged from the struggles undertaken by workers to gain independence. She discerns and suggests, hence the irony, that behind the same value lay opposing conducts: the solidarity she learned and put into effect, on one side, the individualism that pursues personal gain, on the other side. Concepción, on her part, opposes an ideal world that solves social inequality through a long chain of favors to a corrupt world in which inequality means that might makes right and the weak are eternal victims. They take different stands, each resulting from a different past but paradoxically similarly affording a critical perspective on present society.

That critical attitude has been transmitted to the next generation.¹⁹ The interviews with these two women are for this reason relevant to the history of the second half of the 20th century. For the second generation residents of the Multifamiliar, born around mid-century, society is an arena to conquer but corruption prevents competing on an equal basis providing instead privileges to a few. For women workers born in Río Blanco also in mid-century, the absence of social justice implies oppression for them. The former consider that organized political participation is necessary to achieve equality of opportunity. For the latter, political participation should seek equality of condition. If these two goals

¹⁶ Roger Chartier, *El mundo como representación* (Barcelona: Gedisa, 1992), 45-62.

¹⁷ Edward Palmer Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1963).

¹⁸ Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 121-127.

¹⁹ I analyzed the behavior of the next generation of Multifamiliar residents in "Parientes"; and of the women in Río Blanco, in "Nosotras somos oprimidas, esposas de obreros": mujeres y política en Río Blanco," in: Sergio Zermeño and Jesús A. Cuevas, eds., *Movimientos sociales en México durante la década de los 80* (México: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1990), 47-62.

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tended to blend in the last decades of the 20th century, they are quickly separating in the first years of the new century.