

# How Corruption Kills: Pharmaceutical Crime, Mediated Representations, and Middle Class Anxiety in Neoliberal Argentina

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## Abstract

*Argentina is referenced by social scientists as a useful case study for exploring the contours of neoliberal crisis in Latin America. The middle classes of Buenos Aires have played a key role in critiquing neoliberal policies, including those that were responsible for the 2001 crisis and subsequent collapse of the country's economy. Yet these same middle classes are also part of an educated urban elite who both produce and consume the newsworthy journalism that remains implicitly supportive of neoliberal truths. The year 2008 marks the beginning of a journalistic saga that revolves around the case of three young pharmaceutical entrepreneurs in Greater Buenos Aires who were kidnapped and killed by what appeared to be a Mexican drug trafficking gang. The alleged intruders were believed to have entered Argentina in order to gain access to ephedrine, a key ingredient of methamphetamine that is made available from the manipulation of legal pharmaceutical products. From this original incident, two cases have emerged as a subject of intense journalistic scrutiny: the "triple homicide case" and the "medicines mafia case." This essay analyzes the unfolding of these cases in the daily newspapers Página 12 and Clarín as an illustration of the ways in which journalistic portrayals of crime in contemporary Argentina are inflected by class. The cases reported could well be characterized as "epic" in that they point to a new form of neoliberal modernity that is populated by entrepreneurial middle class criminals operating at the borderlands of legal and illegal activities. The case suggests that in Argentina, new forms of sociality may be emerging among the middle classes, who have not only experienced neoliberal collapse but have also been subjects of journalistic reporting that predicts their inevitable pauperization. [Neoliberalism, criminality, white-collar crime, pharmaceutical politics, drug trafficking, Mexican drug gangs, Argentina].*

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The best political community is formed by citizens of the middle class.  
Aristotle

## Introduction: an epic homicide in Buenos Aires

Three pharmaceutical entrepreneurs in their mid-30s disappeared in August of 2008 from Argentina's capital city of Buenos Aires. A few days later their tortured bullet-ridden bodies appeared—dead—in a ditch on the side of the road. The middle class identities of the victims—three thirty-something entrepreneurs involved in the legal pharmaceutical industry—combined with the gangland shooting and violence on their bodies caught the attention of the Argentine public.<sup>1</sup> It soon

became clear that this triple homicide was part of a complex web of drug trafficking, fraud, and white-collar corruption that linked criminals from different classes and countries. The case also clearly linked entrepreneurs (read: upper and upper-middle class) of the legal pharmaceutical industry to gangs (read: lower class) involved in the production of illegal drugs, and both of these groups to a broad range of normative and mostly white-collar criminal and corrupt activities across Argentine government, union, police, judicial, and health care sectors.

Since that time, the “triple homicide case” began to figure prominently, in numerous stories on a daily basis, in newspaper reporting in the capital city, as journalists and police investigators attempted to piece together the events that had led to the murder of the three young upper-middle class entrepreneurs. In this essay, I argue that this case garnered, and then reproduced, this iterative media attention because it exhibits the rudiments of what anthropologists are coming to interpret as “epic” (Comaroff and Comaroff 2006) crimes; crimes that through (excessive) media representation work to construct and intensify a sense of shared citizenship among a certain “public.” That public within the Argentine context is an already exclusive bourgeois public (as in Habermas’ bourgeois public sphere) that expresses its perspectives in the news reporting and editorial sections of the major urban newspapers of Buenos Aires. Summarizing the work of many anthropologists and other social scientists studying violent crime, Jean and John Comaroff (2004:804) write about the anxieties of a public constantly exposed to the “banal theatrics” of a mass media that both racializes crime and criminalizes race. They explain how in the context of neoliberal capitalism, crime and punishment have become “obsessions” of both rulers and subjects, creating new geographies of crime and terror. More “flexible” than ever before and extending across nation-states, crime has joined terror in gaining the attention of national security institutions. The Comaroffs focus on quantifacts: “statistical representations that make the world factual” (2006:211). Similar to epic crime portrayals, these statistics are inevitably consumed by an anxious middle class not as a representation of reality, but as reality itself. “Epic” crimes thus intensify the sense of shared citizenship (2006:235) by using the power of mass mediation. “Mass mediation is integral to the process converting extraordinary happenings into a generic intimacy, a shared sensation of fear. Their victims are at once unusual and horrifically commonplace: you, I, could be next” (*ibid*:235). Journalistic portrayals of crime are interesting to urban ethnographers because they demonstrate the purported recursiveness between mass mediation and the middle class “publics” that anthropologists, at times, seek to describe.

Anthropologist and historian Claudio Lomnitz (2008) reflects on the role of historiography and public commentary in the media, drawing from his experiences as a columnist writing for a newspaper in Mexico City in the mid-2000s. He discusses the ways in which professional historians are drafted into media commentating work and come to draw on a series of “stock images” as part of their participation in public mass

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mediated discourse. Suggesting a connection between economic crisis and concentrations of power in the cultural field (*ibid*:55), Lomnitz points to the imposing role of journalistic writing within the political process: “It is a performative reflection of ‘the facts,’ creating news even as it reports on them” (*ibid*:56). David Harvey (2005:40) gives similar weight to media portrayals when he writes of the way in which neoliberalism has ensnared certain segments of the media, leaving intellectuals and national leaders such as Clinton and Blair with no choice but to “continue the good work of neoliberalism, whether they like it or not” (*ibid*:63). It is this iterative process and performative reflection of the facts of journalistic reporting that I concentrate on here.

The triple homicide case in Argentina provides an example of how class-inflected mediated representations of social life under neoliberal capitalism are entirely capable of feeding middle class anxieties, even when the current president is vocally opposed to standard neoliberal strategies of economic restructuring and even when the reporting source is a center-left newspaper. This essay thus shows how journalistic reporting in this case created its “bourgeois public” and then reinforced a set of developing anxieties of that public through the powers of mass mediation. In the following pages, I examine representations of the triple homicide as it appeared in two Buenos Aires newspapers whose readership is, broadly speaking, “the middle class.” I ask three related questions that seek to understand the mutual constructions of the middle class “publics” and the mass media as they converge around middle class fears and anxieties. First, what does the journalistic coverage of the triple homicide and medicines mafia cases reveal about the taken-for-granted pairings of lower class criminality with violent crime and middle class criminality with white-collar corruption? Second, how does the iterative nature of daily reporting intensify contemporary middle class anxieties? And finally, what performative effects might the content and reportage of these epic cases produce on middle class readers? My interpretations emerge from two kinds of data collection: first, my close reading of the journalistic coverage of these two cases as published in the newspapers *Clarín* and *Página 12* between August 2008 and March 2011, and second, my grounded ethnographic understanding of the wider context of this case, informed by an intimacy with the constructions of violent criminality in the region<sup>2</sup> and with more recent fieldwork within the broadly drawn legal pharmaceutical industry in Buenos Aires and Mexico City since 2003.

## Mass mediated productions of middle class anxiety

In July of 2008, just a month prior to the triple murder, a synthetic drug laboratory producing large quantities of methamphetamine was discovered in a farmhouse in Ingeniero Maschwitz, a northern suburb of Buenos Aires Province. Nine Mexican men were arrested in the

farmhouse laboratory, and phone records later came to show that they had been in contact with the three victims of the triple homicide. More connections between the laboratory and the three victims were drawn from a statement made two days after the murder by the Minister of Health, Graciela Ocaña. Prior to her appointment as Minister, Ocaña had been director of the government retirement and pension program PAMI.<sup>3</sup> She revealed that during her tenure at the program, a colleague within the institution, Rubén Romano, had issued a threat on her life. Ocaña's statement indicated that Romano had defrauded PAMI through bribery and the manipulation of medications, hospital records, and government programs, siphoning off millions of pesos to banks in the exterior. In Ocaña's account, Romano and other corrupt members of his "mafia" had left PAMI by 2005 and found refuge in other institutions. The case thickened when it was revealed that one of the three victims, Sebastián Forza, had admitted shortly before his murder to participating in a medical defrauding ring that was connected to Rubén Romano.<sup>4</sup> Specifically, Forza had disclosed<sup>5</sup> that he began receiving death threats when he broke ties with the group. As the journalistic evidence unfolded, the revelations and arrests surrounding the production, extraction, and distribution of falsified medicines came to be known in the Spanish language press as the case of the *mafia de los medicamentos*, or *mafia de los remedios*, terms translated in the English language press as either "medicines mafia" or "drugs mafia."<sup>6</sup>

Clarín is the largest newspaper in Argentina, with a circulation of 330,000 and 44 percent of the market share. It is published by Grupo Clarín, a conservative media conglomerate widely recognized as opposing the current Kirchner government. Página 12,<sup>7</sup> in contrast, is a center-left-leaning Buenos Aires daily newspaper founded in 1987 that has a circulation of about 150,000.<sup>8</sup> The journalists who covered this case in these two major Buenos Aires newspapers investigate and highlight a number of elements that are both ordinary and disturbing within the Argentine context. The early information on the case points to connections between upper-middle class victims and a conglomerate of lower class foreign actors from Mexico and Colombia. Drug trafficking organizations were central to these discussions, and the implication of the developing narrative was that foreign (also read: lower class) characters had intensified and involved in violence their ordinarily corrupt Argentine (also read: middle class) victims.

Importantly, the homicide of these three middle class entrepreneurs took place within a broader cultural setting of high anxiety attributed to "belonging" to the *porteño* (meaning, resident of Buenos Aires) middle class. Precipitated by the 2001 economic crisis and the subsequent pauperization of the middle classes, "anxiety" has become a modern leitmotif of the Argentine middle classes, both in reflexive discourses circulating in the media and in theoretical discussions produced by academics. Over the past three years, the triple homicide and medicines mafia cases have developed into a complex crime drama that continues to feed this anxiety.

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Any commentary about the Argentine middle classes must take as backdrop the 2001 economic crisis and resulting sociopolitical collapse, the largest sovereign government debt default in history. The collapse or *corralito* as it was called was in process several years before December 2001. One prominent author from a neoliberal think tank characterized the dramatic devaluation of the peso and subsequent freeze on bank accounts that characterized the *corralito* as “bank robbery by the political elites” (Salerno 2002 in Harvey 2005:106; see also Auyero 2006). The collapse involved a number of actors, but is often characterized as the final blow after years of a neoliberal policy characterized by recession, faulty monetary policy, currency devaluation, poorly negotiated foreign debt, and betrayal by the international banking community. The North American psychoanalyst Nancy Hollander provides a vivid sense of how the middle class engaged with the crisis:

The entire economy collapsed, plummeting millions of Argentines into boundless states of insecurity and panic . . . Alongside an unemployment rate of 20 percent and growing, incomes plunged by 30 percent, and foreign-owned banks transferred more than \$40 billion to their home offices. All savings and checking accounts were frozen, and when banks declared insolvency, the savings of pensioners and the middle class were virtually destroyed. Wages and salaries were reduced by 65 percent, and unemployment continued to soar. But then something extraordinary happened.

A spontaneous mass uprising erupted, one of the most explosive upheavals of multiple social sectors in Argentina’s history. The people found their collective voice, and . . . hundreds of thousands of pot-banging, impoverished, middle-class people, pensioners, unemployed workers, and trade union activists converged on the Presidential Palace to demand that all those responsible . . . leave the country—the politicians, the bankers, the transnational corporations, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and the military. *Que se vayan todos*—“all of you get out now”—was the battle cry that became the symbol of the challenge waged by the middle and working classes united against a system that robbed them . . . Over a two-week period, Argentina saw a rapid turnover of three different presidents, each forced to resign by the protesters. In the frenzied period that followed, Argentines built an oppositional movement that for a while challenged the state and the very bases of capitalism itself. (Hollander 2010:211–12)

The intensity of the crisis transformed Argentina into a kind of international textbook case available to social scientists and economists arguing for a particular understanding of neoliberalism. David Harvey (2005), for instance, describes the Argentine case as one that illustrates the incompatibility between neoliberal theory and practice. He illustrates how even neoliberal enthusiasts in Argentina were stunned by the way transnational banks, lenders, and markets had derailed Argentine wealth. During the time of the 2001 economic crisis, analysts from both the left and right wings of the political spectrum emphasized the serious nature of

what was happening. In spite of their ideological differences, they held one idea in common: the crisis threatened an end to the middle class.

The prediction of demise for the Argentine middle class surfaced long before the *corralito*, however, with some scholars identifying the fear of failure as a long-term stressor for middle class citizens. Emanuela Guano (2004) reports that during the heart of the enthusiastically neoliberalizing Menem regime in the 1990s, the middle class, in the midst of increasing impoverishment, attempted to make sense of its own demise by constructing the “mestizo lower class” as “dangerous,” “polluting,” and “foreign.” She notes the presence of a subtle discourse about race and modernity that permeated the political arena during this time, whereby, “whiteness and membership in the urban middle class tacitly establish who has the right to speak for the Argentine nation.” For Guano (2003), the “fear of falling” that was produced by the media and other popular works<sup>9</sup> nourished this discourse among white *porteños*, in effect working to nullify lower middle and working class claims to citizenship and human rights. The relentless media reporting regarding the demise of the middle classes no doubt worked to produce heightened levels of anxiety among the same middle class readership. Similarly, in the reporting of the triple homicide case, both newspapers produced journalistic renderings that seemed to be approaching their middle class readerships with the sense that this homicide had produced an entirely new—epic—phenomenon in Argentina, and one that the middle classes needed to pay attention to.

The chain of figures touched by the triple homicide and related drugs mafia case is long, and even as I write this essay in 2011, the federal judge in charge of the case (a figure of contention himself because of his connections to the Menem regime) continues to call on powerful witnesses for testimony and to arrest, charge, and indict protagonists from across the political spectrum. These include government officials, labor union leaders, pharmacy and drug distribution owners, truck drivers, customs agents, chemical importers and exporters, and many others. The triple homicide case initially captured the attention of the Argentine readership because it revealed dense connections among white European middle class citizens and darker-skinned Mexican drug traffickers, a narrative in sync with the common middle class ambivalence, if not prejudice, toward mestizos and immigrants. But the case also held “shock value” because of the initial execution-style homicide that was produced on the bodies of young middle class men, something declared by the media as “never seen before” in Buenos Aires.<sup>10</sup> One has to pause at such a declaration and wonder what exactly has “never [been] seen before” because most Argentines reading this case in the newspapers are very likely to either remember or be aware of the violence and executions of other historical timeframes, including the Dirty War. Perhaps, then, one must assume that what has “never been seen before” is the collaboration of middle class white-collar entrepreneurs with Mexican drug gangs, something that can be understood as an emergent form of sociality. This new middle class form of sociality, I argue, is what is unprecedented and epic about the case. In collaborating with this underclass, a more risky,

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and violent type of white-collar middle class crime seems to be emerging and posing a threat to both left-wing and right-wing notions of modern security.

## The triple murder crime scene

Early news reports of the murder crime scene in August through October of 2008 suggested that some form of organized crime or mafia was probably directly involved in the triple homicide. The three pharmaceutical entrepreneurs had been killed gangland style with bullets to the head. Forza received seven bullets, four to the head and three to the chest. Ferrón and Bina each received four bullets, three to the head and one to the chest. One of the victims appeared to have had an ear cut off. All three were found with hands tied behind their backs, bound by plastic cuffs identical to those used by the federal police. This suggested to some reporters and investigators that federal police may have been involved in the crime. Yet the guns used were .40 calibers, a type relatively unusual in Argentina but made famous by a much-publicized 2008 shoot-out at the Unicenter shopping mall, one of the largest malls in Latin America and a premiere middle class shopping destination.<sup>11</sup> Members of the Medellín drug cartel allegedly waged the shoot out, so some journalists began to suggest involvement of Colombian drug lords. But when it surfaced that all three of the victims had ties to pharmaceutical companies that were hypothesized to be producing medicines containing ephedrine, reports began to focus on the possibility of ties with a Mexican drug cartel based in Sinaloa. Sebastián Forza owned a small pharmaceutical company and distribution outlet that specialized in oncology and HIV/AIDS medications that contained the product, and Damián Ferrón worked as a mid-level distributor of these products to pharmacies.

As exposed by the events of the triple homicide case, ephedrine travels from Argentina to Mexico, where Mexican drug cartels use it as a precursor in the production of methamphetamine. Beginning in 2005 and culminating in 2007<sup>12</sup> as part of a crackdown on the Mexican drug trade, ephedrine became highly regulated in Mexico. In response, Mexican drug traffickers increased their transnational activity in search of new suppliers. Before news of this case broke in August 2008, ephedrine was still entirely unregulated in Argentina. At the time, the cost of one kilo of ephedrine was about US \$70–80 in Argentina, while the same kilo was valued at approximately US \$7000 in Mexico. Clearly, ephedrine has the potential to form a potent bridge between legal and illegal drug production and to generate a great deal of profit.

The first year of reporting on the case suggested that a group of Mexican drug traffickers and their Argentine accomplices had cooperated extensively in extracting ephedrine from legal drugs and moving it into Mexico. The source of the drug had most likely been either legitimately produced medications (as had been the case with the Ingeniero Maschwitz laboratory that extracted ephedrine from legal pharmaceuticals) or extra supplies of ephedrine imported into the country by those

with a license to do so. Soon after the homicide, the government moved fairly quickly to better regulate the importation of ephedrine, hoping this move would take Argentina off the global table as a soft target for the drug trafficking business.<sup>13</sup> Although the triple homicide case has still not been “solved” in the sense of identifying and bringing to justice those who committed the murders, the case has uncovered multiple couplings of illegal and legal activities in an array of companies, organizations, unions, and government entities.<sup>14</sup>

Investigators gained much of their information about sales associated with ephedrine from SEACAMP, the pharmaceutical company owned by Sebastián Forza. Company records led to the arrest of businessman Néstor Lorenzo, an entrepreneur who owned a major pharmaceutical distribution outlet called Drogería San Javier that supplied products to smaller pharmacies and other entities. Lorenzo was charged with a range of crimes, all of which indicated his participation in a series of illegal activities that could be described superficially as white-collar crimes that betrayed the public trust associated with his professional appointments. His charges included adulterating cancer and hemophilia drugs, appropriating funds from social assistance programs, stealing medicine from official programs that included governmental programs, and embezzling funds from the Ministry of Health’s Administration of Special Programs (APE). Shortly after Lorenzo’s arrest, Juan José Zanola, the General Secretary of the Bank Clerk’s union, was also arrested. Zanola was charged with leading an illicit association dedicated to supplying stolen, expired, and adulterated medicines. He had defrauded the government by charging the APE for non-existent treatments through the creation of false clinical histories and fraudulent drug packaging. His wife, Paula Aballay, was also criminally charged. Yet at each milestone in the case, the media seemed to never fully digest the intensity of these crimes, nor did they present their perpetrators as the usual kind of criminals. They proceeded with caution when discussing guilt or innocence, noting the complexities of what must be proven in court before the defendants would be judged as guilty. But later revelations of the victims’ associations with Mexican ephedrine-seeking cartels undermined the seeming middle-classness of these accounts. New and dangerous connections between what had earlier been considered distinct forms of crime (crime associated with business and crime associated with drug trafficking) were brought together for the first time. As such, the case became emblematic of the fall of the middle class, now anthropomorphized in the figures of three well-dressed businessmen who fraternized with organized gangsters.

### Neoliberal capitalism, the middle classes, and crime

**A**nthropologists writing about politics, class, and culture in Latin America know that the urban middle classes play a pivotal role in the socio-political arena and are therefore essential to consider.

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One of the presuppositions accepted by the progressive left is that neoliberal ideology in practice dismantles the protective nets of the welfare state and generates more and new forms of poverty ushering in the advanced forms of marginality now visible in the United States and Europe (Wilson 1987; Wacquant 2008). A compelling argument against neoliberalism is that it works toward the restoration of class power, although not necessarily for the same individuals (Harvey 2005). This particular critique of neoliberal formations assumes that there are crises and fluctuations in the system, and that some individuals will lose class power while others will gain it.

Scholars addressing the effects of neoliberalism on the labor force more generally (e.g., Comaroff and Comaroff 2000; Freeman 2007) have been attracted to Richard Sennett's (1998) idea (in spite of its implied psychologism) that the "flexibility" promised and delivered by the new capitalism leads to a "corrosion of character." Sennett attributes this to the ways in which neoliberal discourses reassign blame to the lower classes: "The attack on the welfare state, begun in the neoliberal, Anglo-American regime and now spreading . . . treats those who are dependent on the state with the suspicion that they are social parasites, rather than truly helpless. The destruction of welfare nets and entitlements is in turn justified as freeing the political economy to behave more flexibly, as if the parasites were dragging down the more dynamic members of society" (*ibid*:139). The new capitalism creates a society in which mutual trust is eroded and there is more active suspicion of others. This is the "problem of character in modern capitalism," as Sennett describes it. With "no shared narrative of difficulty, and so no shared fate . . .] character corrodes; the question 'Who needs me?' has no immediate answer" (*ibid*:147).

Although a sub-genre of scholarship on neoliberalism addresses criminality, violence, drug trafficking, and marginality, the literature generally considers these phenomena as part of the "natural" domain of the least powerful classes, and not the middle classes. In contrast, sociological and anthropological literature on the middle classes tends to focus on consumption practices, whether of products or of media, but not on violent crime.<sup>15</sup> Corruption, however, is a common theme among political scientists and sociologists. In general, this literature characterizes political parties, the legislature, the police, judiciary, and business as corrupt, and the non-governmental sector is by comparison characterized as less corrupt. A recent summary of corruption data from Latin America distinguishes Argentina as compared to its regional neighbors as (a public) perceiving "more corruption in these five institutions than do most citizens around the world" (Blake and Kohen 2010:30–1). The academic literature thus works to affirm one of Latin America's most pervasive imaginaries about the relationship between violent crime and corruption: violent criminality is the stuff of the lower classes and white-collar corruption that of the middle and upper classes. Corruption is thus generally understood as a "white-collar" form of criminality. Although corruption is understood to be problematic for democratic institutions,

anthropologists have only erratically addressed it.<sup>16</sup> Because research on corruption so easily lends itself to a re-Orientalization of peoples and governments, particularly in the case of developing post-colonial countries, anthropologists have tended to avoid engaging in its documentation and theorization. But there are many descriptively rich documents that speak of the corruption that beguiled the early post-liberation years of the Argentine republic and historically situated the privileged classes. One only has to look at Darwin's (original 1839, 1959) *Voyage of the Beagle* for a European sense of this early corruption.<sup>17</sup> Argentine academics have not hesitated to address the many modes of corruption they have experienced within democratic and authoritarian governments between the 19<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, with the Menem administration (1989–1999) trumping others for its worldwide reputation of corruption with impunity.<sup>18</sup> Given this class-based division, then, it is a given that in the Latin American context, white-collar crimes associated with corruption often go with little or no punishment while low-level petty crimes are brutally punished by law enforcement and the judiciary.<sup>19</sup> Thus, when a white-collar criminal is identified and perceived to be involved with violent transnational criminal drug-trafficking gangs or with activities that threaten the physical wellbeing of the broader public, his arrest punctures normative crime scenarios and complicates the public's conception of crime, corruption, and public security.

What frames the triple homicide and drugs mafia cases as interesting to both local middle class Argentine communities and global security communities is its suture of Mexican criminal drug trafficking (read as violent, foreign, dirty and polluting) with its whiter middle class Argentine counterparts. As criminal investigators and journalists followed the evidence, the parameters of the case began to extend far beyond the insertion of Mexican drug traffickers to include secret criminal collaborations among Argentine elites, political entrepreneurs, and bureaucrats. The investigation extended to include labor unions, hospitals, pharmaceutical companies, and even political campaigns. Argentina's middle class readership was inundated with images of a new kind of violent criminal that could no longer be easily dismissed as mestizo, lower class, or Mexican. The whiteness of the criminal narratives and the non-whiteness of the violent ending that characterized the triple homicide and medicines mafia cases quickly disrupted more traditional understandings of crime and law and order, and seemed to spawn a new understanding of social life inside of neoliberal modernity. It is in this sense that the case is "epic."

## Narrating middle class crime

From the very first moments that I began tracking the major newspaper accounts of the triple homicide, I was struck by how this middle class crime was reported in Argentina. The triple homicide case became an evolving tale of the execution of three young entrepreneurs with nice cars and a taste of the good life, all of whom allegedly

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colluded with dangerous drug-trafficking criminals from Mexico. The journalists who covered this case in the major Buenos Aires newspapers investigate and highlight a number of elements that are both ordinary (white-collar crime and corruption) and disturbing (the collusion between these same white-collar middle class Argentine entrepreneurs and criminal drug gangs originating in Mexico and Colombia) within the Argentine context. The early information on the case points to connections between middle class victims and a conglomerate of foreign actors from Mexico and Colombia. Drug trafficking organizations were central to these reports, and the implication was that foreign characters had corrupted their Argentine victims. Criminal drug-trafficking organizations previously believed to operate mainly within Mexico and Colombia had now made their way into Argentina, threatening legitimate Argentine pharmaceutical companies. The ten Mexican men who were arrested at the synthetic drug laboratory in the suburbs of Buenos Aires were eventually sentenced in an Argentine court on charges of drug trafficking in October of 2010 for prison sentences between four and six years together with their Argentine ephedrine suppliers (five total) who were sentenced similarly.<sup>20</sup> But an equally significant effect of the journalistic inquiry was the accompanying revelation of pervasive middle class corruption and collaboration with a different and new-to-the-scene, more violent kind of criminal.

A day after the triple homicide bodies were found (August 14), news was released that during the months before the murder, Sebastián Forza had sought protection from law enforcement after breaking ties with an organization that had been selling illicit drugs. He had accumulated a debt of more than eight million pesos and four hundred unpaid checks. Information emerged that the National Institute of Medicine alone had lodged thirteen accusations<sup>21</sup> against Forza's company for the adulteration and sale of prohibited or stolen medicines. According to the newspaper articles published in August of 2008, the victims were the last link in a long chain of legal and illegal activities. Evidence suggested that they had been "reducing" legal pharmaceuticals taken from either government programs or from laboratories producing falsified medicines.<sup>22</sup> Yet Forza's humility in seeking protection through law enforcement—his willingness to change sides, or as it was sometimes reported, to recognize that he had been deceived—won him some favor with the press. Journalists suggested that the criminal activity may have been too much for Forza, that he had gotten in too deep and may have had regrets. He and the other victims were subtly produced as different from the "more criminal" victims of regular varieties of street crime, and to some extent they were represented sympathetically.<sup>23</sup>

Argentina has long understood itself to be a country with a sizeable and important middle class, particularly when compared with the class structure and historical problems of inequality exhibited by its neighbors, most notably Brazil. Significant sectors of the Argentine middle class became poster-children for neoliberalism during the Menem administration (1989–1999), supporting the state's embrace of free market ideology,

the privatization of public utilities, and the dollarization of the economy. But in the aftermath of the 2001 economic crisis, Argentines from those same classes have become increasingly ambivalent about the promises of neoliberalism. The President herself has publicly waxed critical on the subject, capturing popular sentiment about the failure of the neoliberal model forwarded by Menem. “Liberty is an election that takes place in the context of ideas and the economy,” she declared in a June 2010 speech to the Central Bank. “Neoliberalism has shown itself to be a failure.”<sup>24</sup> The relationship between neoliberal ideology and the middle classes is complicated throughout Latin America, and Argentina is no exception. For scholars such as Guano (2002, 2004), the middle classes have always exhibited ambivalence toward neoliberal policies, even during the foundational Menem regime of the 1990s (Guano 2002:184). In her account, this ambivalence was incited by constant media pronouncements regarding the impoverishment of the middle class. As the fall of the middle class became a journalistic trope, readers began to find an “obsessive echo” in the headlines of local and national newspapers that fed their own fears of middle class failure. Poor sectors of the economy also experienced hardship, both during the final years of the Menem regime and in the wake of the 2001 economic crisis. But in its use of class-inflected tropes to underscore the intensity of the fall from economic security, the urban newspapers of the bourgeois public sphere (the mainstream print media) presented the middle class as suffering the most.

The same obsessive echo emphasized by Guano and directed at the middle classes is repeated in journalistic accounts of the cases I focus on here. The three protagonists, portrayed as married young professionals with expensive tastes, fall victim to a moral free-fall because of their membership in an indebted and struggling middle class. Their behavior is out of control: mired in debt and corruption, they flirt with risk and danger. And as the cast of implicated characters grows to include more and more members of the middle class, so too does the obsessive echo. Their Mexican collaborators, most often portrayed as common thugs, do not receive such humanizing descriptors. And yet, the initial narrative of criminal foreign invaders loses its traction before a far more complex story of Argentine middle class collaborators who have the potential to decay the body politic from within.

## The “lettered city,” crime, and middle class anxiety

In *Nightmares of the Lettered City*, literary scholar and cultural critic Juan Pablo Dabóe asserts that “monsters” haunt the Latin American lettered city, and have turned “noble dreams into nightmares” (2007:1). He builds on the work of Angel Rama (1984, 1996), who theorized the Latin American “lettered city” as a project of New World Iberian monarchs to produce hegemony of the written word among a new class of educated urban elites or *letrados*. Masculine, white, urban, and Europeanized, the *letrados* came to embody a new national identity that formed

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journalistic trope*

during the nineteenth century. The monsters in this case were the rural bandits who were positioned in the national political unconscious as Other to the *letrados* (Jameson 1981). Guano finds that the nationalist dichotomizing of *civilización* and *barbarie* has been a central motif in the formation of Argentine national identity more broadly and is still prevalent today: “The currency of the representation of nonwhite, rural, and lower class barbarism stretches well into the present” (2003:148–50). Is Argentina now witnessing a new kind of *barbarie* that is situated in the interior of the middle classes instead of on its outskirts? Is a new kind of monster populating the lettered cities of Argentina in the midst of its unending neoliberal nightmare?

Early reports of the triple homicide and drugs mafia cases furthered a “generic intimacy” (Comaroff and Comaroff 2006:235) by emphasizing the middle class professions and fashionable accoutrements of the young male victims. The protagonists drove nice cars, frequented upscale coffee shops, and accumulated huge debts. They donated to political campaigns and lived in chic neighborhoods. By all reports, they belonged to respectable white upper middle class families in Buenos Aires. Forza was the son of a manager of the Argentine pharmaceutical company Gador<sup>25</sup> and owned his own pharmacy and pharmaceutical distributing business in the capital. Ferrón was a salesperson who distributed pharmaceutical products to social assistance funds (*obras sociales*). Bina worked as an advertising executive of an annual business publication that focused on ports and the maritime industry. The first week after the bodies were found, newspaper sources converged to situate Sebastián Forza as the central figure in the case because of his previous links to a case involving fake oncological drugs. Both he and Ferrón suffered from enormous debt.

The pages of *Página 12* and *Clarín* narrated the tale of a mismatch between the middle class habitus of these young men and the roadside ditch where their violated bodies were found. “If the three assassinations have to do with the world of false medications,” a subnote in *Página 12* declared, “we are seeing the first deaths of this kind in Argentina. There are no prior executions that have to do with this crime. For this reason, various sources we consulted suggest that the triple crime seems to be more accurately placed in the drug world.”<sup>26</sup> The men were reported as missing by their families on August 7, 2008, and the coverage that followed situated the three victims in a bed of middle class consumerism. Shortly before the murder, Forza and Ferrón had been seen having breakfast together at an upscale bar called “Open” in the commercial center of Pilar. They were later spotted having lunch with Bina at the restaurant Lisandro Bar in the neighborhood of Liniers of Buenos Aires. They were not seen after that. The press assisted the investigation in the same way they would a kidnapping and provided details about the type and location of the victims’ cars. Ferrón’s truck, a red Suzuki Vitara 4X4, was eventually found at Galicia 2700 in Flores. It had been torched with gasoline, and a pistol missing both its cartridge and bullets (later discovered to belong to Forza) was found in its interior. Forza’s vehicle, a black Peugeot 206, was found at Solís 1000 in the Constitution neighborhood

with the keys still in the ignition. Journalists created vivid images of a burning truck set on fire in broad daylight and a car with keys in the ignition. The threatening and staged nature of these crime scenes led investigators to believe that the victims of the kidnapping were not petty thieves, but rather organized “professional” criminals trying to make a statement. Interviews with the victims’ immediate family members affirmed press reports that these men were upstanding citizens. The day after the bodies were found, Ferrón’s brother told investigators that even though he was very close to his brother, he had only rarely heard Ferrón mention the other two crime victims: “These are names that we haven’t heard.”<sup>27</sup> Ferrón’s mother made a public statement regarding her son’s character: “My son is a boy who works hard (*chico trabajador*) and was never in a conflict nor in any other strange things. The truth is that for us this is terrible.”<sup>28</sup>

But as the investigation unfolded, it became clear that these three men were not merely indebted middle class consumers. Forza, the apparent ringleader of the group, had cooperated with law enforcement officials before his death, a cooperation seemingly motivated by desperation in order to secure protection. As the evidence thickened, the press began to consider Forza’s “bad boy” side, especially when he was revealed to be the subject of an investigation for adulterating medications. Earlier in the year, a wheelchair had been left in front of one of Forza’s storefronts. On it, a menacing sign read, “This Time You Are Saved.” This dramatic threat to his life suggested to the public that these perpetrators were not the usual corrupt entrepreneurial middle class money launderers. Just days after his body was found, police records confirmed that Forza had been in phone contact with the only survivor of the Unicenter Mall shoot-out of July 2007, the Colombian Jiménez Jaramillo, who was under the protection of both the United States Drug Enforcement Agency and the international criminal police organization Interpol. In the year following his death, his wife, Solange Bellone, continued to claim that Forza had been deceived by bad characters who had fooled him into believing that his actions were legal. But in December of 2009, she was arrested for her participation in SEACAMP, the company at the center of the conspiracy to defraud the state through the transit of adulterated medicines. Bellone was accused of selling falsified oncology medicines and spent four months in prison. Her ongoing business dealings with specific labor unions and social assistance organizations after her release led to important arrests and charges in the case (notably long after the initial deaths) in 2010 and 2011.

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## The fall from legal to illegal

Throughout much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Argentina stood out among the countries of Latin America for possessing an influential and heterogeneous middle class dating from the 1930s. The Argentine middle classes were a pride to the nation, and by the late 20<sup>th</sup> century they had expanded to include public workers, administrative staff, professionals,

small entrepreneurs, and business people. Intergenerational social mobility was particularly successful for white European immigrant groups. Yet this same middle class later experienced fluctuations in the marketplace that shook the very core of its identity. According to a recent article about the longitudinal aspects of lifestyle fright among Argentina's middle classes by sociologists Kessler and Di Virgilio "the middle classes [have] experienced frequent lifestyle fright like no other social category" (2010:201). Kessler and Di Virgilio note that middle class victims had a greater sense of what was happening to them during the 2001 crisis than they did during previous market fluctuations, and that as a result of this awareness the acquisition of specific consumer items became increasingly important to one's sense of identity and belonging to the middle class. Individuals began to assert their inclusion in the middle class by accessing certain consumer goods, whether clothing, vehicles, or travel.

Kessler and Di Virgilio (2010) conceive of the new poverty and its attendant pauperization of the middle classes after the 2001 crisis to be related to other forms of pauperization in Latin America, but also as uniquely Argentine. They write about middle class impoverishment in Argentina as part of a general process of destabilization where every aspect of family organization linked to household finances becomes a subject of scrutiny, change, and suppression. Their interviews with members of the Argentine middle class illustrate that impoverishment has acted as a "constant coercion toward change" (207) and that it is lived as a transformation of daily habits. In short, this seemed to be the end of social mobility for the middle classes and the expectations of this class for upward mobility seemed to be in jeopardy. Additionally and importantly, the sudden nature of the collapse and its resulting impoverishment meant that individuals would come to doubt the effectiveness and predictability of accumulated social capital. According to the authors, a seemingly distorted set of priorities emerged in this instability, whereby individuals seemed to rely heavily on their social capital as an alternative resource, although without entirely predictable results. But the newly impoverished had resigned themselves to the fact that some of the usual adaptation strategies did not work (Kessler and Di Virgilio 2010:201–210). Most tragically, this accelerated form of pauperization deeply affected how individuals classified themselves, casting doubt on middle class belonging.

Vilán was also under investigation for selling adulterated medications

Thirteen days after the initial triple homicide victims were found, Ariel Vilán (34), the president of Droguería Unifarma SA who had commercial connections to Sebastián Forza, allegedly committed suicide by jumping from the ninth floor of his parents' apartment. He had apparently fled there after learning of the triple homicide. Like Forza, Vilán had business debts and unpaid checks that totaled over five million pesos. He too was under investigation for selling adulterated medications: specifically *Variate*, a medication used to treat hemophilia patients, and *Ritonavir*, an HIV/AIDS drug. Like Forza, he had donated generously, in the amount of 160,000 pesos,<sup>29</sup> to the first presidential campaign of Cristina Fernández de Kirchner. Three months after Vilán fell to his

death, Emiliano Marcos, a student of biochemistry and employee in a pharmacy, was found lying dead on a railroad track, his body severed in two. It was not clear whether he was placed in the path of the train or whether he had committed suicide, although it later became known that he had shared information with investigators and was a key witness in the triple homicide case. But his girlfriend, Natalia, who was pregnant with his child and who spoke to the press on the day his body was discovered, decisively declared that he was a “happy man” and “would not have had a motive for suicide.” A year later, Natalia was found roaming the railroad tracks close to where her boyfriend had been found, contemplating her own suicide. Federal Police who found her in distress released a statement to the press that described her as “in a profound state of depression.”<sup>30</sup>

## Conclusions

The triple homicide and medicines mafia cases together form a tale of how normal and quite ordinary forms of corruption and white-collar crime came to find involvement in violent criminal drug trafficking with origins in Mexico and Colombia. It spoke deeply, one could say, to the unconscious of the middle class newspaper-reading public, suggesting that these young entrepreneurs had gone too far, beyond the boundaries of expected and ordinary white-collar corruption, and found themselves among colleagues with a very different set of rules. The triple homicide case and its aftermath bring into focus a series of anxiety-ridden themes that coalesce around the middle class: pharmaceutical relations, the intersection of the legal and illegal drug industry, the anxieties of neoliberalism and globalization, middle class crime and corruption, national states in democratic transition, and anxiety in the aftermath of a neoliberal crisis. The early journalistic reporting of the triple homicide case positioned the three murder victims within a entirely white European middle class modernity: their downfall as young adults was due to their connections with the wrong kind of “foreign” criminals. Three years later, the case had evolved into something far more existentially disturbing and seemingly far more integrated within the heart of many other institutions. It implicated a diverse range of players in the very ordinary Argentine middle classes as collaborators in a very profitable fraud of government, unions, hospitals, and even individual patients.

The details of the two cases thus locate Argentina in a long chain of activities that make many people rich but also cost dearly. As the months and years pass from the initial homicide, the cases grow into something bigger than a tale of transnational and technological sophistication within the drug trafficking circuit. While linking citizens and government officials of the Argentine white-collar middle classes to a number of Mexican drug traffickers, they also show the willingness of members of the middle class to take risks that seem incongruent with their alleged habitus. As the entanglements of these actors and their activities thickened, it became increasingly difficult for journalists to differentiate

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between true collaboration and simple coincidence. Over the course of the three years of reporting, “connections” between alleged participants came to be based on scant evidence, such as the appearance of a cell phone number, or the receipt of a campaign contribution. Politicians began to win favor by suggesting the involvement of their opponents in the larger ring of crime that surrounded the case. At the same time, as I conclude writing this in April of 2011, new accusations of fraud and money laundering against the country’s most powerful union leaders and connected to the medicines mafia case are being made and supported by credible witnesses, such as the former Minister of Health, Graciela Ocaña.

Héctor Capaccioli, the ex-Superintendent of Health Services and campaign finance director (first term) for President Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, was one of the “earliest” middle class criminals to emerge in the case. In February of 2011, federal Judge Oyarbide accused Capaccioli of embezzling public funds, abusing his authority, and violating the duties of a public official. Specifically, he was indicted for the arbitrary distribution of 47.7 million pesos (approximately 11.7 million US dollars) among 52 social assistance unions.<sup>31</sup> He was also questioned on his use of the petty cash fund at his disposal. On the surface, this individual accusation and indictment points to just one case of embezzlement among many public employees who were accused of white-collar fraud. In fact, if Capaccioli had just been indicted for these acts and not connected to the medicines mafia case, then his actions would hardly be worth reporting. But Capaccioli’s intensive navigation of the borderlands between legal and illegal terrains led to his ascendency as a lead figure in the narrative. His prominent position as campaign contribution manager in the 2007 presidential campaign of Cristina Fernández de Kirchner also adds another level of political intrigue to the case. In short, Capaccioli became iconic of just how far the middle class had fallen. In the recent phrasing of the former Minister of Health Graciela Ocaña, the case of Cappacioli “clearly shows how corruption kills.”<sup>32</sup>

The triple homicide case and its aftermath thus point to a less discussed by-product of Argentina’s neoliberal economic reforms and the subsequent collapse of the economy: the intensification of entrepreneurial middle class criminal activity. Differential country-specific regulatory policies may have induced cross-border criminal activity, but the collaboration between pharmaceutical entrepreneurs and drug trafficking gangsters could not have been successful without the close assistance of powerful middle class Argentines located across nodes of industry, labor, and government. The case thus produces a new cause for white middle class anxiety: “the enemy within.” Scholars who have written about the Argentine middle classes in other historical contexts, such as the Dirty War of the 1970s, have noted the potential for the Argentine government to issue an “authoritarian response”<sup>33</sup> to public chaos. Certainly, the 2001 collapse of the economy and resulting political crisis should be understood as a moment of public chaos, and yet an authoritarian response was not called upon (Vilas 2006). What the triple homicide and

the medicines mafia cases do suggest is that the neoliberal collapse and the resultant anxiety experienced by the *porteño* middle class may have created new forms of middle class sociality in Argentina.

The newspapers *Página 12* and *Clarín* are two of the media outlets charged with narrating the events taking place within the triple homicide and drugs mafia cases. There are important differences in the reporting style and ideological interests of the two newspapers that I have not had space to engage in the context of this essay. But what I have shown is that the class iconography through which both newspapers communicate middle class habitus and community to their readerships are familiar ones, in spite of these differences. The pervasive presence of middle class icons across a narrative that begins with violent, dangerous (foreign) outsiders and ends with an extensive web of professional insiders has captured the imagination of an already anxious middle class, perhaps stoking that anxiety in new ways. If “corruption kills,” as the former Minister of Health Graciela Ocaña and the newspaper coverage of this epic case suggests, then the very real monsters lurking in the lettered city may very well be the middle class residents themselves.

If “corruption kills,” then the very real monsters lurking in the lettered city may very well be the middle class residents themselves

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup>I use the word “public” here in the sense of Habermas’ (1989) depictions of the early European “bourgeois public sphere,” a public that was already an educated public that also acted in a prejudicial manner to those excluded. By focusing on two newspapers set in urban Buenos Aires, I necessarily limit my analysis to this public.

<sup>2</sup>See Goldstein (2007, 2003).

<sup>3</sup>PAMI stands for *Programa de Atención Médica Integral*, or Integral Health Care Program.

<sup>4</sup>See *Página 12*, August 16, 2008, and *Clarín*, August 16, 2008.

<sup>5</sup>See *Página 12*, August 16, 2008, and *Clarín*, August 16, 2008.

<sup>6</sup>The English language press used both terms, and in some cases the translation produced the possessive forms, “medicines’ mafia” or “drugs’ mafia.” Throughout this essay, I use either “medicines mafia” or “drugs mafia,” in the attempt to simplify this language.

<sup>7</sup>*Página 12* is one of the top five newspapers—in terms of circulation and readership—in Buenos Aires and is credited with bringing back an intelligent form of investigative journalism to Argentina (Alves 2005:197).

<sup>8</sup>Circulation figures vary with source, but Press Reference estimates 150,000. See <http://www.pressreference.com/A-Be/Argentina.html> (Accessed April 21, 2011).

<sup>9</sup>Guano (2003) cites as an example the popular study by the Argentine sociologists Minujin and Kessler (1995).

<sup>10</sup>A number of articles point to the novel aspects of this case, and in particular to the idea that this kind of violence in connection with false medicines is the first of its kind in Buenos Aires. See Kollman, Raúl, *Página 12*, August 14, 2008, August 7, 2009, and December 22, 2009, and O'Donnell, Santiago, *Página 12*, June 14, 2009.

<sup>11</sup>The Unicenter Shopping Mall is located just north of Buenos Aires and opened in 1988. It is one of the largest of its kind in Latin America (and certainly in Argentina), with a 14-screen cinema and over 300 stores, including Christian Dior, Armani Exchange, and Yves Saint Laurent. It is an important icon of modernity for the middle classes.

<sup>12</sup>The U.S. Department of Justice (2010) National Drug Threat Assessment report makes clear reference to 2007 as a landmark year for ephedrine regulation in Mexico.

<sup>13</sup>According to the Argentine newspapers, legal ephedrine importation increased more than five-fold between 2006 and 2008. Soon after the triple homicide, the government acted to more strictly regulate the importation of this "legal" ephedrine. See *Clarín*, 18 Sept 2008.

<sup>14</sup>Nordstrom (2007) points out that more attention has been given to the traffic in illegal narcotics as compared to the smuggling of legal pharmaceutical products.

<sup>15</sup>See O'Dougherty (2002) on middle-class consumption habits in Brazil.

<sup>16</sup>A notable recent exception is Smith (2007). See Anders and Nuijten (2007) for fuller argument on why anthropologists have avoided studying corruption.

<sup>17</sup>Darwin (1959:132) writes of the questionable sense of honor and justice in the region.

<sup>18</sup>Even Pope John Paul II commented on Menem's corruption and in 1995 issued a statement that "corruption and its impunity risk becoming generalized in Argentina and are leading to social indifference and skepticism" (Manzetti 2000:159).

<sup>19</sup>This shifting rule of law according to the identity of the perpetrator is common in the region; see Pereira (2005o).

<sup>20</sup>See *Página 12*, 8 Oct 2010, 9 Oct 2010, and *todanoticia.com*, 8 Oct 2010.

<sup>21</sup>Depending on the source, Forza had between 15 and 20 cases forming around him. See *Página 12*, 15 Aug 2008, and *Clarín*, 15 Aug 2008.

<sup>22</sup>See *Página 12*, 17 Aug 2008, and *Clarín*, 17 Aug 2008.

<sup>23</sup>One article opened with, "They were young, entrepreneurial, fitness fanatics, fathers." See "Sombras de una mafia de medicamentos," *Página 12*, 16 Aug 2008.

<sup>24</sup>*Página 12*, Ultimas Noticias, 3 June 2010.

<sup>25</sup>This information was reported by Christian [sic] Sanz in, "Aniversario del triple crimen, investigación especial," *Tribuna de Periodistas*, 6 Aug 2009 (Accessed 12 April 2010). Gador is a leading Argentine pharmaceutical company (since 1940) that synthesizes Active Pharmaceutical Ingredients (API).

<sup>26</sup>Kollman, *Página 12* 14 Aug 2008.

<sup>27</sup>Cecchi, *Página 12*, 14 Aug 2008.

<sup>28</sup>Cecchi, *Página 12*, 14 Aug 2008.

<sup>29</sup>Approximately US \$54,000 in the 2007 timeframe.

<sup>30</sup>See *Página 12*, 4 Jan 2010.

<sup>31</sup>See *Página 12*, 9 Feb 2011.

<sup>32</sup>Video interview with Daniel Santoro, *Clarín*, 13 Feb 2011. See [http://www.clarin.com/politica/Graciela\\_Ocana-la\\_mafia\\_de\\_los\\_medicamentos-Venegas\\_3\\_425387468.html](http://www.clarin.com/politica/Graciela_Ocana-la_mafia_de_los_medicamentos-Venegas_3_425387468.html) (Accessed 14 April 2011)

<sup>33</sup>Much has been said, for example, about the history of military intervention in Argentina as well as the call for “order” and its use as an authoritarian metaphor against “subversives” in the context of the Dirty War. In the context I write about here, I note the potential to use this call to order against those perceived to be petty criminals, delinquents, foreigners, and/or members of the darker-skinned working classes (DuBois 2005; Guano 2004).

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