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DOI: 10.1080/02255189.2017.1284651

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To cite this article: Manuel Larrabure (2017): Post-capitalist struggles in Argentina: the case of the worker recuperated enterprises, Canadian Journal of Development Studies / Revue canadienne d'études du développement, DOI: [10.1080/02255189.2017.1284651](https://doi.org/10.1080/02255189.2017.1284651)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02255189.2017.1284651>



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Post-capitalist struggles in Argentina: the case of the worker recuperated enterprises

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ABSTRACT

Argentina's recuperated factory movement – worker-run cooperatives formed out of previously bankrupted or abandoned businesses – was a reaction to the 2001 crisis following the neoliberal reforms of the 1990s. As a radically transformed workplace, expressing the values of cooperation and democracy, recuperated enterprises challenge linear and stagist accounts of development in which the “advanced capitalist societies” of Europe and the United States are at the forefront. Drawing on Marx, particularly his dialectic and multilinear conceptions of social change, I argue that cooperative labour in Argentina's recuperated enterprises shows that the seeds of post-capitalist future are inherent in capital's present.

RÉSUMÉ

Le mouvement des entreprises récupérées en Argentine – les coopératives de travailleurs nées d'entreprises ayant précédemment fait faillite ou été abandonnées – fut une réaction à la crise de 2001 qui a suivi les réformes libérales des années 1990. Étant un milieu de travail radicalement transformé, exprimant les valeurs de la coopération et de la démocratie, les entreprises récupérées défient les bilans linéaires et séquentiels de développement dans lesquels, les « sociétés capitalistes avancées » de l'Europe et des États-Unis sont au premier rang. Faisant appel à Marx, en particulier à son dialecte et à ses conceptions multilinéaires du changement social, j'avance que le travail coopératif au sein des entreprises récupérées en Argentine montre que les germes d'un avenir post-capitaliste sont inhérentes au présent du capital.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 15 February 2016
Accepted 25 October 2016

KEYWORDS

Cooperatives; Marxism;
empresas recuperadas; social
movements; Argentina

Introduction

In classical sociology and development theory, progress has been largely understood using a linear approach, in which advanced capitalist countries are at the forefront of world history (Bhambra 2014). From this perspective, “underdeveloped” countries in the “Global South” are undergoing a process of “catch up” in relation to Europe and the United States. This approach is perhaps most evident in modernisation theory, outlining neatly defined stages of development that all countries must supposedly go through (Rostow 1960). In this narrative, not only are Western capitalist nations considered the

pinnacle of political and economic development but also the dispossession they inflicted on the Global South as part of their development is largely erased from view. In other words, as Bhambra (2014, 21) argues, modernisation theory drew on the particular experience of Western modernisation and, from this, “established a global frame within which all societies could be placed”.

At the other end of the political spectrum, some interpretations of Marxism, particularly those supportive of the former Soviet Union, shared this linear understanding of progress and development. However, this time, the end point was not capitalist liberal democracy but communist society. As De Angelis (2007, 5) tells us, in order to reach communism, traditional Marxism believed in the application of stages of development that included primitive accumulation, forced collectivisation and state-led accumulation. With the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989, an alternative to capitalist modernity no longer appeared possible or desirable, ushering a new era of triumphalism for pro-capitalist modernisers of the neoliberal variety. Fukuyama’s (1992) thesis of “the end of history” and the proclamation that “there is no alternative”, commonly attributed to Margaret Thatcher, would become the unofficial slogans of neoliberal modernisation for decades to come.

One of the countries to most fully embrace the neoliberal promise of progress and modernisation was Argentina in the 1990s. During this decade, Argentina became the poster child for the “Washington consensus”, closely following the advice of the World Bank and IMF. For Argentina, the neoliberal recipe of deregulation, privatisation and labour market flexibilisation was nothing short of a drastic turn. Since the 1940s, the Argentinian political economy had been characterised by Peronism, a political compromise in which organised labour agreed to adopt the more bureaucratic and top-down structures of the Peronist state in return for high levels of employment, rising standards of living and a degree of political influence over national politics (Murmis and Portantiero 1971; Gambini 1983; Patróni 2004).

Although at first the neoliberal reforms acquired some legitimacy in the country, stabilising inflation and generating growth, by the late 1990s their contradictions became evident. Unemployment, poverty and debt soon spiralled out of control. Wages shrunk and growth began to slow down, as capital began to exit the country. Urban centres were particularly affected. For example, in Buenos Aires, precarious employment rose to 40 per cent by the year 2000, while the combination of unemployment and underemployment affected 36.4 per cent of the workforce by 2001 (Patróni 2004, 111). In other words, rather than putting Argentina onto a path of progress and modernisation, neoliberal “structural adjustment” became a new form of dispossession (Harvey 2003, 2010). The outcome marked the final breakdown in the Peronist bargain, meaning Argentina’s working class, led by organised labour, had effectively lost its ability to maintain the degree of political and economic power it had achieved in previous decades.¹

As the country plunged into a crisis, signs of unrest began to emerge. A new movement of unemployed workers, known as *piqueteros*, showed its discontent by regularly organising road blockades through community organisations (Dinerstein 2003, 2013). By late 2001, it became clear that the system was broken. In an attempt to prevent the financial system from collapsing, the government froze savings accounts (an event known as *el corralito*), triggering widespread anger among the middle class. On 19 and 20 December, people from various sectors of Argentinian society poured into city squares, resulting in

mass demonstrations and an insurgency-like environment that some likened to the Paris Commune of 1871 (Moreno 2011).

It was out of this political environment that the now-famous demand, *que se vayan todos* (they all must go), was produced. This demand, aimed at all of Argentina's established political class, succeeded in toppling five presidents in less than two weeks. The result was a power vacuum in the state; one that was eventually filled with the election of Néstor Kirchner as president in 2003. In the meantime, *asambleas barriales*, popular neighbourhood assemblies, began to pop up all over the country. Through them, people began to self-organise, often forming *clubes de trueque*, barter clubs, to meet people's everyday material needs. In other words, with the collapse of the neoliberal edifice, people began to find alternative forms of organising economic and political life.

In this article, I examine what became the most durable of alternative organisations to emerge out of the 2001 crisis, namely the *empresas recuperadas por sus trabajadores* (worker recuperated enterprises) or ERTs. ERTs are worker cooperatives that were previously traditional capitalist firms. During the crisis, these firms were abandoned by their original owners, most of whom were facing bankruptcy. With the immediate goal of preserving their jobs, workers at these firms decided to take over their workplaces. As worker cooperatives, ERTs are democratically managed by the workers themselves. This makes ERTs unusual examples of collective property in the context of a capitalist market. ERTs exist in a legal grey zone in relation to the liberal conception of private property in Argentina, and ERT workers are therefore under the permanent threat of eviction.

Closely tracking the growing unemployment, poverty and business closure rates, the number of ERTs in Argentina increased rapidly after 2001, extending across a variety of sectors, including service, manufacturing and construction (Vieta 2014). Many of the firms that became ERTs had a long and important history. For example, in the 1980s, Zanon was one of Latin America's most important ceramics factories. Similarly, Hotel Bauen was one of Argentina's most luxurious and well-known hotels when it opened in 1978. The best and most up-to-date figures put the number of ERTs at 314, with a total workforce of 13, 462, continuing a trend of strong growth since 2001 (Ruggeri 2014).² Although representing a tiny fraction of the economy, the ERT movement has garnered broad support in Argentina, often seen as a feasible solution to the problem of unemployment and a better alternative to state welfare programmes.

ERTs, I argue, can be understood as examples of "post-capitalist struggles". In contrast to struggles that focus on defending or improving the position of a particular group, workplace or community against capital, post-capitalist struggles also feature the construction of new social relations. As we will see, ERTs articulate forms of democracy and inclusion that radically depart from the traditional capitalist firm as it developed in Argentina during the Peronist era. In doing so, ERTs express the latent powers of what Marx calls "the collective worker". For Marx, the collective worker signalled a potential post-capitalist society that goes beyond the alienation and fragmentation of value relations within capitalism. This would be a society based on cooperation and conscious planning. As Marx (1976a, 447) puts it in *Capital*: "When the worker cooperates in a planned way with others, he strips off the fetters of his individuality, and develops the capabilities of his species". In expressing the powers of the collective worker, ERTs therefore prefigure a society beyond capitalism, meaning they show us a glimpse of a post-capitalist future within the capitalist present.³

To say that a post-capitalist future can begin to be built within the capitalist present implies that capitalism does not follow a closed, predetermined logic, but is, rather, an inherently contested system that at times can even be partially superseded. Indeed, as Lebowitz (2003) argues, we need to understand capitalism as being comprised of not only the side of capital but also that of the workers. Although part of an organic whole, each side pursues its own interests against the other. To reproduce itself, capital must dispossess, fragment and exploit workers. On the other side, workers seek to fulfil their own needs by confronting capital and winning concessions that improve their standard of living. However, at times, workers can go beyond winning concessions, struggling to create new circuits of non-wage labour through which they can develop a range of new collective capacities, what Lebowitz calls “human development”.⁴ This means that developing a post-capitalist society does not have to wait for “after the revolution”, but can begin to be built in the now (Lebowitz 2006a).

Importantly, beginning to build a post-capitalist future implies a process of collective learning. For this reason, the concept of post-capitalist struggles recognises that in order to one day overcome capitalism, workers need to engage in forms of transformative learning that generate alternative perspectives and new subjectivities, what Motta (2011) calls “pre-figurative epistemologies” in everyday life. This form of learning therefore goes beyond what Freire (1970) calls the “banking model” of education, in which a political vanguard simply deposits revolutionary knowledge into the heads of the oppressed. As emphasised by theorists working in the field of critical pedagogy, a truly transformative pedagogy is one that emerges from people’s own self-activity, particularly different forms of struggle and everyday democratic practices (Foley 1999; Holst 2002; Schugursky 2006).

Finally, it is imperative to emphasise that, as mere pre-figuration, post-capitalist struggles remain embryonic and do not express a decisive break from capitalism. Hence, ERTs should not be thought of simply as “cracks” existing outside capitalism (Holloway 2010). Wright’s (2010) concept of “real utopias”, organisations that embody a better world in the imperfect conditions of the present, better captures the contradictory character of ERTs. However, Wright’s concept is based on the rejection of capitalism as an organic, dialectical whole; a move that prevents us from seeing the full implications of the ERT movement. As I will discuss further in the conclusion, the ERT movement not only challenges the logic of capital, but also expresses a key moment in capitalism’s organic development, one that links its origins with its future. From this perspective, ERTs demonstrate that history is not over, and remind us that a future beyond capitalism need not be on the side of Europe or the United States.

Transforming the workplace, building the future

My analysis of ERTs is based on a Marxist critique of the capitalist workplace. For Marx (1976a), capital produces a systematic division of labour through which workers become increasingly underdeveloped and one-sided. As specialisation develops over time, a sharp division is then created between intellectual and manual labour (Braverman 1974; Burawoy 1985). Capital also fosters separation in the workplace based on racial, gender and other divisions that exist outside it (Lebowitz 2003, 2006b). Finally, as the division of labour progresses, the labour process becomes ever more despotic, as the capitalist

intensifies supervision and regulation (Marx 1976a, 477). In short, rather than being a place in which workers can freely share their knowledge and skills, the capitalist workplace is characterised by division, competition and fragmentation.

Although existing within a capitalist market and therefore facing many of its pressures, ERTs depart from the traditional capitalist firm in that, like all worker cooperatives, they are democratically managed by their own workers. In other words, there are no bosses at ERTs. As we will see, this feature of ERTs helps foster new values and practices, such as collective responsibility, collective management and freedom. These findings are consistent with the work of Vieta (2014), who describes ERTs as “transformative learning organisations” for their capacity to transform subjectivities through a process of informal learning. In the Argentinian context, ERTs also present a challenge to the vertical and bureaucratic structures of the union movement developed during the Peronist era. In other words, they represent something new rather than an attempt to return to the Peronist past.

The findings presented below are based on ethnographic research conducted in three cities in Argentina between January and April 2013. In Buenos Aires I studied Hotel Bauen, Bruckman and Maderera Córdoba. In Rosario I looked at Lo Mejor del Centro and Centro Cultural La Toma. Finally, in Neuquén I investigated Zanon/FaSinPat. My data collection tools included semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, observation and the use of a survey that focused on participants’ learning. The survey is an adaptation of the one developed by Schugurensky and Lerner (2007) for their study of participatory budgeting in Rosario, Argentina.

In addition to workers, I also spoke to relevant government officials and bureaucrats, including personnel at the *Instituto Nacional de Asociativismo y Economía Social* (National Institute of Associationism and Social Economy) or INAES. Overall, I conducted close to 30 interviews. The interviews were conducted in Spanish⁵ at each individual workplace and lasted anywhere from 15 minutes to one hour.

Although the ethnographic data collected provide a rich account of the specific workplaces studied, these represent only a fraction of the ERT movement and therefore my findings are not necessarily generalisable. In addition, an inherent weakness of interviews is that these data express the research subject’s particular recollection and interpretation of events and not necessarily the events themselves. In other words, interviews are an “indirect” source of information (Creswell 2003, 186) that is less reliable than first-hand observation. For this reason, to maximise reliability, events discussed by any single research subject have been cross-referenced with other interviews and, where possible, with observation. Furthermore, as noted throughout the text, many of my findings are consistent with a number of other studies on the topic (Dicapua and Perbellini 2010; Fernández Álvarez and Florencia 2010; Ruggeri 2014; Vieta 2014).

Challenging union bureaucracy

Before taking over their workplaces, in many cases ERT workers had to challenge their own unions, which historically formed part of the bureaucratic and top-down Peronist structure.⁶ As Dario,⁷ one of the workers at Hotel Bauen, put it: “The union worked for [the owner]. It put itself at the service of what he said”. Dario explained how every time a worker went to the union office with a complaint or a grievance, the union would take no action, telling the workers to “take what you can get” because the business

is not in good shape. The message from the union was clear: don't complain and just be happy that you have a job. Then, when the hotel filed for bankruptcy, Dario continued, the union simply administered the bankruptcy without putting up a fight.

However, what became most shocking to the workers was that they spotted union representatives sneaking into the hotel late at night taking couches and other furniture. It was at this moment, Dario explained, that workers realised that they were never going to be compensated for what they were owed and were able to overcome their fears and take the decisive step of occupying the hotel. In other words, their decision to recuperate the hotel was inspired as much by the actions of the owner as those of the existing union structure.

It was a similar situation at Maderera Cordoba, a woodworking shop and retail outlet in Buenos Aires. When I asked Manuel, one of the workers there, if there was a union in the shop before the takeover, he said:

Yes, but here unions are not very effective for certain things [... The woodworkers] were affiliated with the woodworking union and we [administration and sales] were affiliated with the commerce union, but they never made themselves present. They literally erased themselves during the bankruptcy. The only ones who helped were [the people from] the movement of recuperated enterprises.

Hence, in both the cases of Maderera Cordoba and Hotel Bauen, the old union structures were part of the problem and ultimately had to be replaced by new organisations that represent recuperated factories.⁸

At Zanon the situation was somewhat different. When I asked Rafael, one of the workers there, to tell me how he became politically active at the plant, he described the difficult political climate he confronted when he was hired in the early 1990s. As he explained, the employers didn't allow the workers to express any political views or join any groups. If the business found out that workers were involved in any political activities, he continued, they would simply fire them. Making reference to Argentina's return to democracy in the early 1980s, Rafael sums up the workplace atmosphere at the time: "it was formal democracy outside but inside the plant there continued to be a dictatorship". I then asked him if the union helped the workers through this situation. His response was:

No, the union was a 'yellow union'. It was the opposite. The union collaborated with the owners. They signed productivity agreements, signed downsizing agreements, 'restructuring agreements' as they were called. But, they always gave the arguments of the owners: 'The business can't, we have to tighten our belts'. They also identified the more rebellious workers and they would give [the owners] this information [...] for [the union] this was normal [...] So, we organised against the owners and the union.

At first, Rafael continues, organising was difficult. Workers often met in secret and political discussions often took place in the context of broader conversations about music or sports. Indeed, workers organised a football league, which became essential for having political discussions. After years of this, workers were able to organise a slate to run against the existing union leadership. When they learned of this, the union and the owners responded aggressively: "[T]here were mass firings. 38 workers – the ones they calculated were the most dangerous".

Unlike other cases, in which workers who faced a hostile union simply began to organise outside of the union, Zanon's workers organised within the union and eventually

transformed it. Indeed, for Rafael, transforming the union was an essential step towards taking over the factory later on.

Workplace democracy

As takeovers began to spread in Argentina after 2001, workers found themselves having to reorganise their workplaces to form worker cooperatives. This means that workers suddenly became collective owners and directly participated in the decision-making at their workplaces. For the overwhelming majority of workers interviewed, the experience of running the workplace collectively is what they value most about their cooperative. As Ruggeri (2014) notes, the assembly is the most important decision-making mechanism in ERTs. When I asked Eliana, who works at Zanon,⁹ what the purpose of her cooperative was, she told me that it was to demonstrate to the whole of the working class that they could run the workplace without exploiting one another. Curious as to what exactly this meant in practice, I asked her to expand.

Eliana immediately highlighted the process of participatory democracy. She explained that, when big decisions need to be made, production is stopped and all workers join an assembly, which can sometimes last for one or two days. For less important decisions, weekly or biweekly assemblies of one or two hours are organised. During the assemblies, workers put forth motions, openly discuss them and then vote. If competing motions are put forward on the same topic, the one with the most votes is the one adopted.¹⁰ Finally, workers also get together by production division (for example, quality-control, packing, shipping). As she explained, every division has an elected coordinator and once a week coordinators of all the divisions get together to discuss and try to solve a particular problem. These meetings are open to all workers. This is important because, as she explained, every worker should have access to all of the same information.

When I asked Magali, a shipping person at Maderera Córdoba, to compare her current experience as a cooperative member to her previous job at a traditional private firm, she also highlighted participatory democracy:

I prefer a cooperative, it's more complex. It's a lot of responsibility, but it's good. It's easier to work with a boss, and make good money [at a traditional firm], but you don't make any decisions, or participate in absolutely anything. You only do your work, put in your hours and behave as best as possible. We do the same thing here but it's more complex because the responsibility is bigger. Even though there's a directive committee that makes most of the decisions, the rest of the cooperative members vote them in and the most important decisions are decided by all. Not the everyday decisions because then it would be a permanent meeting and nobody can live like that either. But basically, the most interesting part is the decision-making process.

I also asked two of Magali's coworkers the same question. Manuel responded that, before, it was all about the managers, and each unit had one. "Now the workshop manager is simply another one of us [...] He is not a boss". Similarly, Claudio said that his cooperative was much better:

There is no comparison because before you had to work with a manager [...] You were under the orders of the manager. It's not the case now [...] there is no manager on top of you that is looking at you and bossing you around. There is a coordinator. He coordinates work. He gives you a paper that says you should do this and that. But he's not going to

make demands of you. He's not going to be behind you looking at you [telling you that] you should do it faster.

Eliana, from Zanon, also appreciated the new-found freedom of working without a boss. When I asked her if participatory democracy was a good way to manage the workplace, she said that there definitely are problems and things can be difficult and tiring sometimes, but that it had important benefits. For her, the greatest benefit was the satisfaction of meeting an objective or changing an attitude without anybody being “behind you with the whip”. She then compared work and life inside the new Zanon with the way it was before:

I've seen what the world is like outside, I know the injustices. It is not fair that they oppress us in this way and that they take arbitrary decisions [...] firing a person without justification, as if we were merely numbers and nothing else. Here, no! Here you have all the possibilities. We've had *compañeros* who have gotten themselves in difficult situations.¹¹ They have damaged machines [...] But if [someone ...] recognises his responsibility and he is willing to change, we give him the possibility. For us the *compañero* is not a number [...] he is a *compañero*, a person. He has feelings. Behind him he has a responsibility with a family.

Similar themes were brought up by a group of female workers I spoke with at Hotel Bauen. I asked them to compare their experience before the takeover with their experience now, and one woman said: “It's a big change because we wouldn't be drinking *mate*¹² at this time of day [approximately 10am]”. Her coworker jumped in: “you couldn't walk around, you had to stay in your section”. Then, the first speaker clarified that, although the workers had the freedom to drink *mate* whenever they want, if there was a big workload, they wouldn't be drinking it. For her, the point was that the workers were the ones who decided. “Nobody comes and gives you orders” she said. In contrast, “If you're under a boss, they come and they suspend you for 15 days”.

I then asked the focus group about some of the advantages and disadvantages of running an enterprise by assembly. One woman said it was a great advantage to work through an assembly because that's how people got to know each other, and how different people think. Under the boss, they explained, they had no right to any opinions. “The boss says no, and it's no”, one woman explained. In contrast, she continued, under self-management “anyone can give their opinion and express what she feels and sees”.

Learning new values and capacities

As workers began to organise themselves and run the workplace collectively, they also unleashed a process of learning through which they began to acquire new values and subjectivities that counter the fragmentation, division and competition of the traditional capitalist workplace. These include democratic management, collective responsibility and freedom. For example, I asked Manuel at Maderera Córdoba what was the most valuable thing he had learned at the cooperative. He said:

Coexistence and the challenge to carry forward an enterprise amongst ourselves. One was always accustomed to working with the boss. One would arrive, work, meet the required hours and leave. Here you have a responsibility. If a sale is lost, you're also losing what's yours [...] For us it was a big shock, for example, I had never worked in a cooperative.

I asked Magali, also at Maderera Córdoba, the same question and she said:

The most valuable thing I learned is that something that appeared impossible to me, works. That's what I value the most. Imagine that one day this cooperative didn't exist; [still], it has demonstrated that even though they tell you you are dumb, that you weren't born to manage anything, that you come from a low class, when you have drive and are decent you can do things better than anybody, especially those who aren't decent [the previous owners ...] sometimes you can make a mistake because of something you didn't know. That's one thing. But it's another thing to do something wrong on purpose [another reference to the previous owners]. We don't owe a penny to anybody, we don't owe any taxes, we have everything up to date. There are few enterprises that can say that.

I then asked her what was most memorable about her time at the cooperative. Her answer highlights the learning that occurs when different opinions are shared:

The fights [...] between members – not fights, discussions. The different points of view. You learn to look at things from a different side [...] not just your point of view. When you are listening to two *compañeros* arguing, perhaps both are right.

At Hotel Bauen, I also asked the three women of the focus group about the most valuable thing they had learned at the cooperative. One of them said, “Being free, Totally free. I'm not your boss, and you're not mine. Working in freedom”. One of her colleagues interjected, “being free and being responsible for what we're doing”. The first speaker then explained that although you still need to be responsible under a boss, you have to be even more so in the cooperative because “if you do something wrong it hurts everybody, and if you do something right it benefits everybody, and we are always thinking about that”.

Puzzled by how exactly they regulate the amount of work and effort each person puts in, I asked them to explain this point. One woman said “whoever finds himself having to work more, works more, and whoever finds himself having to work less, works less”. Her coworker interjected: “that's why I say the responsibility belongs to each person. A person knows if they find themselves having to work more or less”. In other words, without regulation by an outside force (the boss), in this cooperative, a sense of collective self-regulation could develop.

Nevertheless, as I was told by one of the workers at Hotel Bauen, there are cases in which people feel others lack a certain amount of discipline. Some people sometimes arrive late to work or do not show up. These types of issues are worked out at the assemblies. Indeed, work discipline is one of the most heated issues, with older workers sometimes complaining that newer workers are not pulling their weight. When I asked how the assembly dealt with these situations, the hotel workers said that they had not found a solution that satisfied everybody and that ultimately people vote and the majority wins. In other words, in the cases in which a more informal method for regulating work is insufficient, the assembly becomes the space in which specific guidelines or sanctions are developed and workers learn a collective sense of responsibility.

At Zanon, Eliana brought up a similar theme. When I asked her how success is measured at the factory, she explained that, like all companies, they have production and sales targets, but that the most important thing was a sense of collective motivation among workers. She explained that sometimes one worker will become extremely negative and that this negativity can become contagious. But then, when that worker changes his attitude and becomes more motivated, that is a sign of success. For her, such attitude changes have to do with the process of dialogue in the factory, in which everybody

shares their views and opinions freely. I then asked her if she ever works more than is expected from her. She said: “Always”. I then asked how this is different from the pressure to overwork that is endemic in traditional capitalist firms. She responded, “for me, it is different because I do it out of conviction. So for me it is a pleasure, not an obligation”. In other words, it is herself, not a boss, who decides her work rhythm.

Another interesting feature of some ERTs is work rotation schemes, which allow workers more freedom to switch positions within their workplace. While there are few such schemes that go beyond the work rotation patterns found in a traditional capitalist workplace (Ruggeri 2014), it is important to note that more flexible job duties allow workers to learn new skills and abilities that break down the typical division of labour found in capitalist firms. At Zanon, workers initially join the cooperative to fill a particular vacancy, but after this, they sometimes move around to different parts of the firm. Eliana, who switched from manual labour to work in Zanon’s press division, noted that her coworkers Rafael and Armando had made a similar move. However, as she explained, political positions are to be rotated and therefore both Rafael and Armando are now back working in production. When I asked Eliana if she liked this option to rotate positions, she said:

I like it because first of all I always like to learn, to learn something new. Then, I think it’s excellent that we have a great deal of capacity as humans and we demonstrate it by doing different types of work. We are not machines that do the same thing all day, every day. We are human beings.

Given how transformative the experience of working in a cooperative has been for many workers, it is not surprising to find that they have developed a strong commitment to their jobs. For example, I asked Magali at Maderera Córdoba if she would switch jobs if she found one that was not in a cooperative but paid more. She said: “No. It depends. Neither yes or no. They would have to offer me something concrete. No, I don’t know”. Her uncertainty is telling of how important the cooperative experience has been for her. Others are less equivocal. In the focus group at Hotel Bauen, I asked the same question I asked Magali, the answer was a resounding no. The three women preferred the freedom of not having a boss over a higher income.

Indeed, the women told me of several people who had left the cooperative for jobs that paid more, in one case triple the amount they made at the hotel. All of them, they told me, came back to work at the cooperative, often citing tight workplace control as the main grievance at the other jobs. Eliana, from Zanon, when asked if she would leave the cooperative for a higher-paying job, said: “I think that not everything is money. Money doesn’t give you happiness. If one sells one’s ideals for money, it doesn’t lead anywhere”. Indeed, her plan is to become a lawyer and use her knowledge “for the benefit of the working class” while remaining a worker at Zanon.

Inclusivity

As with the industrialised world, the typical capitalist workplace in Argentina during the post-war era was divisive and exclusionary in two important ways. First, it was male-dominated, meaning women were largely excluded from the workforce or were relegated to lower-skilled and precarious work. A second feature of the Peronist workplace was

that labour unions became highly insular, mostly working within the state's vertical structures and failing to reach out to the broader community. An important aspect of ERTs is that they take meaningful steps to address these two forms of division and exclusion.

First, as Vieta (2014, 206) notes, ERTs display a fusion of community and enterprise; this is why they are often referred to as a *fábrica abierta* (open factory). On the gender front, ERTs give women the freedom to combine work responsibilities with parental ones, helping to redefine the limits between the workplace and the home (Fernández Álvarez and Florencia 2010). In addition, the participation of women in the initial struggle gave them a new sense of empowerment that challenges machismo in the workplace (Dicapua and Perbellini 2010).¹³

Focussing first on the topic of gender, my interviews revealed the connection between empowerment and women's experience at ERTs. For example, I asked Magali, from Maderera Córdoba, if she had experienced machismo or had any difficulties participating at her cooperative, in which only four out of 19 workers are women.¹⁴ She answered in a confident voice:

No. If they have machismo, I feel sorry for them. We are four real bitches here. There is no problem with that [machismo]. We are a small minority here [...] but I never felt discrimination of any kind [...] Really, we are all equal here!

I posed the same question to the focus group at Hotel Bauen, and one woman responded: "at the beginning yes [the men] tried [...] But we wouldn't let them. We told them, we are women and we are fighting side-by-side with you [...] Let's struggle together". She noted that women are always more fierce than men because "in the family it's always the woman that takes the household forward. It's rare that a man takes care of the household". She then explained that her skills and knowledge from running the household could be used to run the cooperative. "It's the same thing", she said.

I then asked them whether, under self-management, they had established new benefits for women. One of the women explained how the cooperative provides much more flexibility for women. For example, women can freely leave work in the middle of the day to pick up their children from school and then later return to their workplace. Although this flexible arrangement for women does not address the broader sexual division of labour, in which it is women rather than men who are responsible for childcare, it nevertheless does encourage women to enter a traditionally male workplace. In contrast, under a boss, their children were not allowed in the hotel. Before, if women had to be with their children, for whatever reason, they had to take a day off work. Not only did they lose pay for this, they also faced a latent danger of being fired. As one woman put it, "with a boss, they always try to find a motive to fire you".

When I asked Eliana, from Zanon, what difficulties or challenges she might have encountered as one of 40 women in a factory of 400, she told me that machismo does exist at the plant. Although many workers had developed progressive ideas about gender relations, she continued, not everyone had.¹⁵ Before, there were fewer women at the factory, she told me. During those days, many men saw the role of women as staying at home taking care of the children, while the men engaged in politics. She then related an incident she had experienced personally:

One day a *compañero* said to me ‘what are you speaking for, your husband used to hit you and you just shut your mouth.’ Then I told him, ‘you know what, you’re right, but he was my husband, and I let him do that because I loved him. But now, no! That ended. I am no longer that person. I am changing and I will continue to change.’ So, it’s difficult but it’s made easier when you have *compañeros* who have a different logic of thinking, and they support and encourage you.

In addition to finding supportive *compañeros*, women at the plant formed a committee dedicated to addressing their needs. Through that committee, women instituted “women’s day”, which gives all women at the plant a paid day off.

In addition to fostering a more inclusive environment towards women, ERTs are much more open to the broader community than the traditional unionised workplace. For example, when I asked Eliana if she feels that the factory is truly hers, she said that she does, but that it was not a sense of personal ownership, but a collective one. The factory “belongs to the community, which supported and sustained us so that this factory could go forward”. As she explained, many people come to Zanon to buy products simply because they support workers’ management, even if they live far away. “There is a value people put in us”, she stated.

Indeed, a few days later, a community member told me that when he got his house re-tiled a few years ago he went out of his way to buy from Zanon. To get all the tiles he needed, he had to drive back and forth several times, quite some distance from where he lived. He told me he believed in Zanon because after the 2001 crisis, they were the only ones that demonstrated a realistic alternative. In recognition of this kind of community support Zanon receives, workers have made it a political priority to support communities. For example, on a monthly basis, the plant donates ceramics to hospitals, libraries and community centres. As Eliana explained, there is one person at the factory whose job is to visit various communities and assess their level of need so that adequate donations can be made. In addition to donations, she continued, the factory opened a high school (*bachillerato popular*) that is open to the public and aims to reach poor and marginalised communities.

Opening the high school was not easy, however. As Eliana explained,

first we had to fight [with the government] to get the high school and then we had to make it open to the community, because [the government] wanted it to be only for the ceramics workers, but we said no: If the plant is open to the community, then the school must also be.

Similarly, Maderera Córdoba has donated part of its space to a group of progressive teachers who volunteer their time to run a high school programme open to the community. For its part, Hotel Bauen donates space for community meetings and often allows workers from other recuperated factories to stay at the hotel for free during particular events.

Conclusion

In this article, I have argued that Argentina’s ERTs express the powers of the collective worker by fostering new values and practices, such as participatory democracy, inclusion and collective management. They therefore represent a radical alternative to the traditional capitalist workplace, characterised by division, fragmentation and competition. Furthermore, they present a challenge to the bureaucratic and top-down structures of the labour movement that developed in Argentina as part of the Peronist bargain. As

such, we can understand the ERT movement as a building block of something fundamentally new in the country; a post-capitalist struggle that prefigures a future beyond capitalism within the capitalist present.

My findings challenge linear and stagist accounts of progress found in sociological and development theory of both the pro-capitalist and anti-capitalist varieties. As we have seen, the modernising promise of neoliberalism had precisely the opposite effect in Argentina. In less than a decade, rather than fast-forwarding into the advanced capitalist world, Argentina witnessed the gutting of the social safety structures built through the Peronist bargain, which for decades had given the country one of the highest standards of living in South America. Indeed, the dispossession created by neoliberal modernisation triggered a new wave of struggles in the country as people began to lose their livelihoods. In turn, these struggles articulated a glimpse into a future more democratic and inclusive than the existing institutions of liberal democracy. However, far from being part of a future stage of history in which capitalism has been overcome – which orthodox Marxism would refer to as communist society – ERTs remain embedded within the capitalist market.

Given the challenges the case of Argentina presents to traditional sociological and development theory, the task then becomes to rethink the disciplines so that they can take into account the non-linear character of development. Although a detailed treatment of this topic is beyond the scope of this article, I can suggest that we engage in an interpretation of Marx that emphasises the dialectical character of his work; in particular, as it relates to capitalist development. Two of Marx's concepts are of special importance in relation to my case study, namely "primitive accumulation" and "the collective worker".

In contrast to linear conceptions of primitive accumulation in which the origins of capitalism are understood to be in some fixed point in time (see Brenner 1986; Blaut 1994), it is in my view imperative that we adopt a more dialectical approach to the concept. As De Angelis (2007, 16) argues:

A careful examination of Marx's definition of primitive accumulation allows us to argue that although enclosures, or primitive accumulation, define a question of genealogy, for capital the problem of genealogy presents itself *continuously*. (emphasis in the original)

In other words, we need to see primitive accumulation as an inherently non-linear and recurring process; one which, as Marx himself tells us, "runs through its various phases in different orders of succession, and at different historical epochs" (1976a, 876). What this means for Marxian-inspired sociology is that we cannot see the development of capitalism as taking place through various discrete stages, but instead as a significantly more complicated process in which new forms of dispossession evolve (Harvey 2003, 2010).

Similarly, rather than looking at a post-capitalist society as a stage of history in the distant future, I suggest that we need to see it as an inherent moment within capital's present. This is indeed reflected in Marx's concept of the collective worker. As Marx (1976a) tells us in his discussion of the capitalist labour process, workers must engage in systematic cooperation for even a single commodity to be produced. In other words, the capitalist labour process already features, indeed requires, worker cooperation. For Marx, the problem was that this cooperation occurred in an alienated form, and therefore workers found themselves in a state of fragmentation and competition in the workplace. Nevertheless, more meaningful forms of cooperation remained a latent potentiality within

the present. Indeed, in *Capital Volume 3*, Marx (1976b, 440) even identifies cooperatives in nineteenth-century England as “the first sprouts of the new”, showing how “a new mode of production naturally grows out of an old one”.

The concept of the collective worker therefore opens the door to an understanding of development that departs from the linear model of progress associated with some versions of Marxism. From this linear perspective, post-capitalism, or communist society, is a discrete stage of history following first capitalism and then socialism. Furthermore, in this model, it is advanced capitalist countries that are leading the way. However, as Anderson (2010, 2) argues, although Marx’s earlier work indeed held an implicit unilinear and sometimes ethnocentric perspective, he later began to embrace a more multilinear approach, in which the future of non-Western societies was treated more as an open question. The case of the ERTs in Argentina helps us see this more open version of Marx’s dialectic; one in which future (collective worker) and past (primitive accumulation) interact and condition each other in the present. Indeed, in the ERT movement, we see how the experience of dispossession triggered by neoliberal modernisation created the conditions for workers in a developing capitalist country to become the “sprouts of the new”.

Notes

1. This is not to say that Peronism as a political movement did not face challenges before the 1990s or that it is no longer a political force. Indeed, Peron was ousted in a military coup in 1955 and the Kirchner governments (2003–2015) had strong links to Peronism. The point I make here is that the neoliberal reforms in the 1990s marked a decisive blow against the specific class compromise developed by Peronism during the post-war period.
2. Other figures are more optimistic. The Ministry of Labour estimates that there are 350 ERTs in Argentina, while *la Unión Productiva de Empresas Autogestionadas*, one of the ERT associations, puts their total workforce at 25,000 (*La Capital*, http://www.lacapital.com.ar/ed_impresa/2013/5/edicion_1634/contenidos/noticia_5323.html).
3. It might be argued that the term post-capitalism could be replaced with socialism or communism. However, precisely because these struggles occur within capitalism, it would be inaccurate or at least confusing to label them as either, as socialism and communism are terms associated with particular stages of history that form part of a linear model of development. In addition, as my interviews revealed, most ERT workers do not affiliate themselves to either political camp.
4. In contrast to the better-known human development and capabilities models outlined by Sen (2000) and Nussbaum (2000), for Lebowitz (2006b) the concept implies an explicit challenge to capitalist social relations.
5. All quoted passages from the interviews are the author’s translations.
6. As Ruggeri (2014) notes, 90 per cent of ERTs were unionised workplaces under the former bosses. However, currently, only 54 per cent of ERTs maintain some kind of link to a union.
7. To protect the identity of research participants, all names used throughout the text are pseudonyms.
8. The two organisations representing recuperated factories in Argentina are called *Movimiento Nacional de Fábricas Recuperadas* (National Movement of Recuperated Factories) and *Unión Productiva de Empresas Autogestionadas* (Productive Union of Self-Managed Enterprises).
9. Eliana started out in production and then moved to Zanon’s press division (public relations), where she is engaged in “political work”. Her comments could therefore be expected to express an organisational as well as a personal perspective.
10. This is typical of how decisions are made at all ERTs I visited.

11. There is no English word for *compañero*. Its meaning is something between friend and partner.
12. *Mate* is a popular Argentinian beverage usually shared among friends.
13. This in no way means that the challenges associated with traditional gender roles and divisions inside the workplace have disappeared at ERTs. Indeed, as Bancalari et al. (2008) argue, women's experience of patriarchy and empowerment appear to co-exist inside ERTs.
14. This gender distribution is typical of the ERT movement as a whole. As Ruggeri (2014) notes in his latest study, 75 per cent of ERT workers are male.
15. Indeed, at several of the break rooms I visited at the plant, the walls were covered with sexually explicit posters of women.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank the peer reviewers for their helpful comments and suggestions, as well as the journal's editors for their excellent input.

Funding

This work was supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada under [grant number 767-2010-2108].

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