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Productive Work as Political Action: Daily Practices of Struggle and Work in a Recovered Factory

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RESUMEN

Conocidas como empresas recuperadas, durante los últimos 10 años se desarrollaron en Argentina experiencias de gestión colectiva del trabajo a partir de la ocupación de fábricas por sus trabajadores. Este artículo revisa una investigación etnográfica que desarrollé en Buenos Aires entre 2002 y 2005, cuando se registró el mayor número de casos. El estudio de las prácticas cotidianas de los trabajadores evidenció cambios en los ritmos y actividades del día de trabajo. Como resultado el "lugar de trabajo" se convirtió en un "espacio de lucha" y al mismo tiempo las acciones de lucha se organización y significaron como "lugar de trabajo". A partir de un caso particular, analizo como las actividades productivas se articularon en acciones de protesta sugiriendo que la recuperación tomó la forma de una acción política anclada en el trabajo productivo. Discuto las implicancias de esta articulación en la redefinición de las relaciones entre los trabajadores. [Argentina, movimientos sociales, trabajo]

ABSTRACT

During the past ten years, collective management practices were put in place via the occupation of a factory in Argentina by its workers. This article discusses ethnographic research conducted on "recovered factories" in Buenos Aires between 2002 and 2005 (the period in which most cases were registered). The study of workers' everyday practices showed changes both in the timing of, and in the activities included in, the working day. As a result, the workplace had become a "site of struggle" and, at the same time, the actions that constituted "the struggle" were organized and signified as part of the "workplace." Drawing on the example of a specific case study, this article analyzes how productive activities were articulated as protest actions, and suggests that the company's recovery turned into a political action that was anchored in work. I discuss

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the implications of these articulations of "work" and "struggle" in the (re)definition of the relations between the workers. [Argentina, labor, social movements]

On December 18, 2001, at the height of economic crisis and social turmoil in Argentina, workers took over Brukman—a textile factory—and began to run it themselves. For several months, the owner had not paid their whole wages and had then abandoned the factory.[1] This workers' occupation took place on the eve of one of the most significant dates in recent Argentinean history. Some days before, in the context of a deep economic recession that had progressively worsened since the mid-nineties, the *corralito* (a new economic measure) was announced. It was intended that this should avoid the end of dollar–peso parity, which had been in force since 1991, and also limited cash withdrawals from bank accounts. Popular protests broke out over the subsequent days: neighbors banged pots and pans in the streets (the so-called *cacerolazos*) and supermarkets were looted. On December 19 and 20 events escalated, with chants of "Out with them all!" (*¡Qué se vayan todos!*)—referring to the authorities. After violent repression that caused more than 30 deaths, the President announced his resignation. In the following days, four different presidents held office. Finally, Eduardo Duhalde was appointed as Interim President: he passed public emergency legislation, put an end to dollar–peso parity, and implemented significant new social policies: Plan Jefes and Jefas de Hogar.[2] At this time, street blockades, mobilizations, and neighborhood assemblies became part of the fabric of everyday life in Argentina.

In this political and social context, Brukman workers had been holding unsuccessful negotiations with the Ministry of Labor. Instead of continuing to comply with a mandatory mediation process, however, they had restarted production under their own management. They made demands in support of this action through protest actions (mobilizations and street blockades) and were supported by left-wing organizations composed of neighborhood assemblies, unemployed workers' organizations, and political parties. There was also a connection established in those first months between Brukman workers and Trotskyist political parties, which some of the workers later joined.[3] This connection significantly shaped the processes that followed, both coloring the construction of claims and the kinds of practices that the ensuing struggle engaged in.

Some months later, Brukman became generally known to be an occupied, worker-managed factory (*fábrica tomada*) producing textiles; furthermore, the workers were demanding that the company be nationalized (*estatización*). Brukman workers were invited to meetings, mobilizations, and events where they were recognized as an example of the anticapitalist and antiglobalization struggle.[4]

Through April 2003, authorities carried out three evictions of Brukman workers; during the last of these, a large-scale police operation constructed a fence around the plant that remained until December 2003. From December 2001 to December 2003, workers carried out 24-hour surveillance of the factory and kept it operational.

The occupation and collective self-management of this factory forms part of a broader recovered businesses movement, which has been one of the most significant social mobilizations in Argentina in recent years: it is concerned explicitly with preserving the "source of work" (*fuente de trabajo*). The movement was an expression of the economic, social, and political restructuring processes in Argentina, which have been taking place since 1976 (Basualdo 2001). The most dramatic consequences have been deindustrialization and capital concentration (Azpiazu 2003; Schorr 2004), and rising job precarity, unemployment, and declining wages (Altimir and Beccaria 1999); social inequalities have also become more entrenched, reflected in unemployment and poverty rates.[5] Although exact figures are difficult to determine, there have been approximately 200 factory and business occupations, 54 percent of which have occurred in the Greater Buenos Aires Metropolitan Area (Ruggeri et al. 2011). While worker occupations have formed part of the repertoire of struggle of Argentine workers since at least the late 1950s (Lobato and Suriano 2003), in the current context, this practice, coupled with collective worker self-management, has served as a mode of action through which workers demand state intervention in cases of business failure (Fernández Álvarez 2007).

On my first day at Brukman in April 2002, a 50-year-old woman invited me in, stating that I needed to talk to their press officer. Clara,[6] who had worked for more than ten years at Brukman, went over events since the occupation. In the following weeks, I visited the factory regularly after work had finished. In contrast to the calm of that first morning, during subsequent visits there was a constant stream of outsiders—buying what the factory produced, carrying out interviews for news reports and academic research, or offering to support the workers' struggle. The commotion was the result of the public visibility the factory had attained: Brukman had become emblematic of worker-controlled factories. During those first visits, I concluded that the day-to-day routine was divided into working hours and hours given over to the struggle; later, I realized the distinction was blurred. The conceptual and practical interplay between "struggle" and "work" explained rhythms, practices, languages, and relationships within the factory. This was much more than a working world. Although working conditions constituted a central point of worker demands, work acquired its full meaning in connection with categories such as "struggle" and "dignity."

Brukman was one of the most renowned examples within the recuperadas universe: the workers made radical demands and this involved a long conflict that included three forced evictions and nine months during which they camped outside the factory door—which drew further attention to their demands. What also made this case stand out was the connection (see above) to left-wing organizations, which oriented the demand process during that first year toward "nationalization under workers' control" (*estatización bajo control obrero*). In contrast, most recuperadas formed work cooperatives and demanded plant expropriation. After going through the *acampe* (camp), Brukman workers joined the Movimiento Nacional de Fábricas Recuperadas (MNFRT) and adopted, in their turn, this line of work.[7]

Two further elements made Brukman stand out: its predominantly female labor force (80 percent of workers in the collective are women) and the timing of when the workers occupied the plant, coming on the eve of the events of December 19 and 20, 2001. As with most such occupations, the 80 (out of 115) employees who occupied (or recovered) the factory were all shop floor workers.[8]

The first few weeks had been especially difficult: there was considerable anxiety about job losses and uncertainty about the future, coupled with a fear of evictions and repressive action, as well as the lack of income due to the closure. The small income that workers received was obtained through contributions from neighbors, activists, and passers-by. There were also issues arising from disagreements, exhaustion, and family problems—and some workers simply abandoned the struggle. Around sixty workers continued the occupation, all of whom had long careers in the profession: on average, they had more than 15 years' experience. At Brukman, cutters and chalk markers—the most skilled work categories—participated to a lesser extent in the recovery, or stayed in the factory for only a short time after the workers' management of production had begun.

After the crisis of December 2001, researchers, activists, and intellectuals became interested in worker-controlled factories. They saw in the recuperadas a localized response to neoliberalism and globalization (Davolos and Perelman 2005; Magnani 2003; Palomino 2003; Petras and Vetmeyer 2002; Rofman, Slutzky and Di Loreto 2003). The discussions included debates about forms of social mobilization and government response to explain the emergence of these new social actors and social actions (Favaro and Aizicson 2003; Petras and Veltmeyer 2002; Rebón 2007). Some analyzed the new mobilizations as a form of social protest or collective action (Davolos and Perelman 2005; Fajn 2003; Favaro and Aizicson 2003; Gracia and Cavaliere 2007); others focused on labor organization (Fajn and Rebón 2005; Hudson 2011; Quijoux 2011; Ranis 2010; Rebón and Salgado 2009). An initial set of studies stressed the political dimension of worker-controlled factories, and a second concentrated on labor organization, exploring the potential for, and limits to, cooperative or self-organized work within the framework of capitalist relations of production. These projects tackled mobilization practices, highlighting either their public and epic actions or processes of labor organization.

Drawing on an ethnographic study of worker-controlled factories in the city of Buenos Aires,[9] this article argues that the everyday organization of work became a space of struggle in which the notion of "working hours" was redefined temporally around what constituted "work." The "workspace" became more than the shop floor itself, becoming a function of both work and "the struggle," to include the regulation and organization of mobilization sites, encampments, and street blockades. The space of such sites of struggle, in turn, was defined as a "space of work"—and was regulated, organized, and signified as such. The border between work and politics was thus blurred, overlapping in terms of time, rhythm, and geography. Hence, I can examine this workspace as socially produced through actions (Lefebre 1991), by showing how the workers, through the occupation and collective self-management of the factory, redefined the contours of what their work was and how it was carried out in terms of its integration with political action.

Here, I draw on work on social mobilization: however, my focus is drawn away from visible and epic events to how such moments are produced in day-to-day interactions (Álvarez, Escobar and Dagnino 1998; Edelman 2001; Nash 2005). For example, James Scott (1985), in his study of everyday forms of resistance, sought to explain the absence of open rebellion, arguing that given the possibilities for repression (both economic and physical), the behavior of the oppressed could not be interpreted solely through public actions. Drawing on E. P. Thompson's (1978) work, Scott argues that public expressions adopted by the dominated, such as deference, were in reality ritualized or calculated, producing a dichotomy between public, open confrontations and hidden forms of daily resistance. In contexts where the public expression of discontent was not possible, a set of practices were developed in a secret or hidden fashion, from intentional idleness, fleeing, passive incompletion of work, and sabotage to songs, jokes, or taunts (Scott 1990). These "practices of everyday resistance" were often invisible in studies of collective action, particularly in studies of social movements theorized as such, since they were not expressed as open and organized modes of protest (Scott 1987).[10]

Scott's attention to everyday forms of resistance illuminates a series of practices that previous definitions of social movements and theories of collective action, whose object of study was constituted primarily in the politics of open confrontation within liberal democracies, left out. In avoiding one of the main problems with these perspectives—their ethnocentrism—Scott's focus encourages us to consider politics beyond the realm of institutions, and protest beyond moments of public visibility, and thus to re-evaluate the role of everyday life (Edelman 2001; Gledhill 1994). According to Scott, unlike notions of protest or social movements (delimited in time, objectives, and organization), everyday forms of resistance constitute a continuum, the purpose of which does not exist prior to action but is created through it (Scott 1987).

Scott's stance has been challenged for romanticizing "the oppressed" and for his dichotomist positioning of that group in contrast to "the dominators," where each opposes the other and is assumed to be homogeneous (Abu-Lughod 1990; Gal 1995; Gledhill 1994; Mitchell 1990; Ortner 1995). Scott also situates the everyday nature of these practices solely in the hidden spaces and thus views them as a sort of infra-politics that is realized behind the backs of the dominators. This perspective misses seeing forms of daily production that lead to public mobilization and protests. However, more problematic is that Scott locates the actions of the dominated outside of the relations of domination. This limits our understanding of how the categories, images, symbols, forms, and institutions used by subaltern groups are often modeled by the process of domination itself (Roseberry 1994), as well as the way in which, within the framework of hegemonic relationships, the actions of subaltern groups can open out spaces of dispute by which state politics and policies are redefined or reoriented (Joseph and Nugent 1994). The characterization of these practices as a kind of infra-politics introduces a principle of asymmetry that hierarchizes public actions (those organized and with clearly defined objectives) beyond quotidian forms of resistance.

Thus, the present article offers a conceptualization of political practice that accounts for the blurred lines between public action and everyday practices and questions the traditional hierarchy between daily forms of resistance and open actions of contention. It proposes viewing collective practices as a continuum whose purpose emerges in conjunction with action itself, rather than drawing from abstract and universal categories such as "autonomy" or "solidarity." There is a need to analyze practices in the social and historical contexts in which they take place, that is, in order to understand the political sense they make for people. The next section begins by reconstructing everyday life in a worker-controlled factory. The work then considers how the idea and the practice of "production" expanded to include protest and how worker control of factories took the form of political action rooted in production. The article then explores the major shake-up in work and production that followed worker control of the factory: the rotation of job positions. It concludes by addressing how newly acquired practices of protest acquired rhythms, formats, and languages relating to forms of factory production.

Daily Life

At 8:30 a.m. the lights were turned off and work stopped. The noise of machines was replaced by the sounds of breakfast being made: women workers set the table and put out food. At the table, workers shared not only what they had brought to eat but also their ideas on the organization of work, on how to obtain an outside subsidy for the factory, and on the agenda for the next workers' assembly. Their discussions were interspersed with the exchange of recipes, accounts of how some had spent their weekend, and weight loss tips. Across the room, some workers ate atop an old machine while still others used the break to rest.

Half an hour later, the lights went on, as did the machines. On one side of the floor, Carolina cleaned jackets.[11] She was good at it, but it had not been her job when she had worked for the owner who had abandoned the factory. Next to her, Lucas, her youngest son, took his morning nap. Manuela was in charge of marking and refining.[12] Her current job was the same as her previous one, but now she alternated it with some financial and administrative tasks, which she learned as she went along. She enjoyed the former most because it allowed her to slip out to the bank for a while. Rosana passed finished jacket fronts on to Manuela while sometimes flipping over her music cassette. She had used headphones before, but now listened at full volume and, occasionally, sang a line or two. Julia, meanwhile, inserted suit waists,[13] supervised by Adriana. Since the start of worker self-management, Julia had traded up to a better machine. She had also had to negotiate with her partner at home in order to stay some nights in the factory as a guard. Rotational guard duty was implemented at the beginning of worker self-management. Groups of six workers would stay in the plant after hours. Women guards often found themselves conducting delicate, sometimes tense, negotiations with partners over domestic–private sphere responsibilities, in some cases expressed as losses, whereas others perceived that it led to greater autonomy (Fernández Álvarez and Partenio, 2010). Julia also participated in the new worker assemblies. Other workers organized the batch of fabric that had just come down from the cutting section. Both men and women stated that overseeing the machinery required precision and care: this work was done mostly by men.

Rosana invited me to sit with her in the adjacent room where she was having lunch with a group of co-workers. She then invited me to a meeting with other workers who were running factories. Over lunch, the workers talked of a delayed shipment and the need to keep production on track. "Some don't realize that things have changed and they go on behaving as though the owners were still in charge. Others think they can be the new bosses. That's why we quarrel," explained Beatriz. There was discussion about the next assembly, at which it would be decided whether production should be interrupted one hour prior to closing, or whether to reduce the hours of those who had taken part in a protest called by another worker-controlled factory whose expropriation had not yet been legally approved.[14]

Thirty minutes later, work resumed at a slower pace, anticipating the end of the working day. While some went home, Diana, Julia, and Rosana went to the meeting with other worker-controlled factory staff. Inés and Manuela met on the first floor to review the week's accounts. Sofía met a client who had just arrived.

Near Sofía, Dolores and Roberto talked with two Ministry of Labor officials about the possibility of obtaining a production subsidy. A short time later, a small group entered the Vieytes Cooperative, a worker-controlled factory in Barracas district of Buenos Aires. The meeting lasted until after 7:00 p.m. It was too late for Rosana to return home. She would once again spend the night in the factory.

With minor variations, this account is typical of daily life at Brukman.[15] Activities were not task specific but included administration and sales, negotiations with outsiders, and meetings at other worker-controlled factories. The working day was now longer and extended into weekends. Production tasks were complemented by struggle-related and management work.

In addition, managing the factory meant difficulties accessing credit, the need to widen technical knowledge in legal and accounting areas, and the need to recover and diversify the client base. A recurring problem was the dependence on finishing textiles sub-contracted to the factory (*trabajo a façon*), which represented a much smaller profit compared to direct commercialization of the product. Indeed, the economic viability of the factory has been a constant challenge, although it receives some state subsidies.[16] This factory is typical in that trabajo a façon has been identified as one of the most significant problems for the recuperadas,[17] but some aspects of the industry itself, like its seasonal variations, also contribute to the economic fluctuation.

Within the dynamics of the process of recuperation, the time for "the struggle" and the time for "self-management" were distinguished: the focus on the former was on mobilizations, public events, and meetings with public officers, militants, and leaders of other worker-controlled factories, while the latter concentrated on production and trading activities. In both cases, the recuperation of the factory modified the everyday life of workers, diversifying their activities and redefining the limits of the working day and the working space. The management of production was part of a broader process to defend the "source of employment," which increasingly combined productive activities and protest actions, thus blurring the boundaries between productive activity and protest. The latter activities became defined as "responsibilities" that had to be fulfilled in the same way as those relating to production. Nevertheless, these frontiers were not defined in the same way by everyone. For some, "lights off" remained a signal to end the working day. For others, there was more to do: it signaled a necessary extension to the working day. These different approaches prompted daily tensions and arguments.

Work as Struggle

Before Brukman became self-managed, work was spatially governed by floor and by gender through assigned tasks. This gender division meant the masculinization and feminization of specific tasks, ranking the former over the latter in terms of

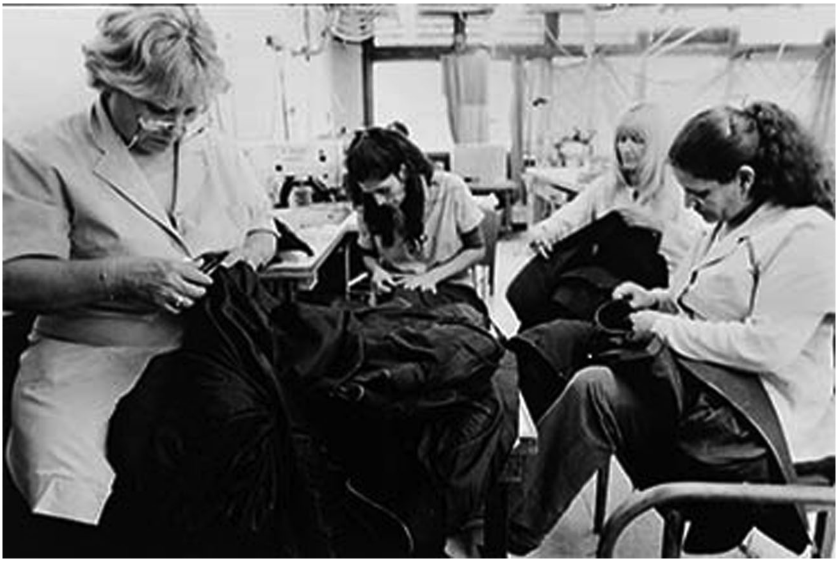

Figure 1 *Workers at the shop floor, October 2004*
Photo by Graciela Calabrese.

job appraisal (Roldán 2000), which translated into wage differences. This was the case for tailoring and "cutting" activities, performed only by men. Other activities, such as the use of sewing machines, could be equally carried out by men or women, but were signified as feminine for their association with "natural" female qualities: such manual skills were signified as "gentleness" and "meticulousness" (Lobato 2007). After the recovery of the factory, this fixed relationship between worker and task (often tying a worker to her/his machine) came to an end through job rotation. Workers took on jobs they had never done before, and some tasks were eliminated. Job rotation and the ability to keep workers employed countered longstanding workplace assumptions linking productivity to a reduction in costs through decreasing worker numbers. Job rotation also obviated the need to bring back managers, administrators, and the highly skilled cutters and chalk markers who had left the plant. Over time, rotation became a means by which to modify the organization of production, including in spatial and gender terms, to some extent. The impact was more significant in some sectors—such as the assembly section, where a majority of women worked—than in others, such as "cutting" and "ironing," where the tasks were socially defined as masculine.

Rotation also made it possible to fill short-term vacancies resulting from absence for various reasons. It increased the number of people who could carry out a specific task, thereby adjusting production times and rhythms. Inés noted other benefits:

> [I]n my section of trousers, with the ironing that is pretty harsh, we made two new shifts, that means nobody stood there for nine hours. And it was a good method because work got done; we didn't have any problems. [It was done] to prevent one person standing there all nine hours. Then, we had a method there in trousers, when we were relatively few, then each one did two or three jobs. That machine there was, for example, empty: I would go and sit, then some work arrived to my machine and another went and sat there . . . Julia, she didn't know how to operate machines because when she entered she did ironing . . . she is not a machine operator but she can operate; if you need her to advance something, you tell her: prepare the pockets, prepare the waist, and she can do it now, she knows how to iron, to prepare, she knows all the steps. All of my partners have learnt everything. The entire group is settled and has learnt. That is what we have achieved in this phase.

Here, Inés emphasizes the positive consequences of task rotation, which resulted in better working and production conditions. She also emphasizes the significance of this change in terms of the diversification of knowledge and skills available to workers who were previously employed in less-qualified positions. Inés then connects two significant aspects of rotation: that learning is "an achievement of the new phase" that cannot be reduced to "technical" aspects connected with sewing; and that it is a key transformation of improved organization. According to Lorena, who had worked at Brukman for eight years before the recuperation:

> You're standing for three straight hours, then when you want to walk your knees hurt; so if you rotate, you have an incentive to do your task quickly, then you're sent to a new work position and the excitement of a new job . . . you want to work fast and to do your job well. Because of this, rotation is better for me. I could do it, I did it . . . With the girls, we said, "two hours each [per task]." [With seam opening, we all said] "but we all don't know how to do it, well let's learn"; and then we started to rotate the iron, it's a horrible job. And in the summer it's dreadful. And well, we rotated, two hours, two hours each.

Lorena's account shows that rotation expanded from a mechanism to fill vacant posts to a means of improving work conditions, reflected in sensitivity to more comfortable physical postures and an enthusiasm to move from task to task. These aspects mark a new, collective reflection on labor organization by the workers, the chance to modify elements of it, and a means by which everybody takes a turn at the more physically demanding tasks.

Lorena noted that before rotation could work, workers had to learn a range of jobs. While that learning process resulted in new skills and better management of the work process, it also led to a possible overload of responsibilities. Pedro mentioned,

> We feel more responsible, more capable. And we have to get trained in many things. Previously, bosses were in charge of the money, secretaries were in charge of administration, the sales sector was in charge of sellers; they managed on their own. But now, we realize that we have to do everything ... sellers, phone operators, administrative clerks, manage the work, supervise, and everything is in our hands, we have a great responsibility.

This learning process involved more than the acquisition of knowledge. New skills included administration, commercialization, and sales; the organization of the cooperative; assembly participation; and negotiation with public officials. For Sandra,

> We learn a lot through discussion ... I tell you, if I have to go to [another] factory again, I don't think they'd screw with me so easily, with everything we've gone through here. I wouldn't trust a boss anymore. I learned a lot.

At the same time, the changes in production were not without their critics. Adriana observed:

> I see that, here, the responsibility falls on fewer of us. And I'm one of those who feel responsible for working out this problem and that there isn't a general sharing [of that workload] ... Many come and do their work hours, and then go home without any worries; and on top of that, sometimes ... they start to question everything when it's [others] staying late, doing more ... we are all workers, but it is a business of our own ... not all of us care about the work and that bugs me.

Adriana was 48 years old, had been a skilled operator before the recuperation, and afterwards started rotating through different tasks, assuming responsibility for some female co-workers, and for sales. Like others, Adriana underlined the differences between those who took responsibility for the collective nature of the work and the enterprise itself, and those who did not. For her, this implied a change of attitude and a need to deal with problems and take care of "the business" beyond strict compliance with working hours.

In the new collective, some job descriptions were eliminated and this brought into question salary disparities. Prerecuperation work categories differentiated wage levels on the basis of jobs and qualifications. Now, worker income no longer came in the form of a salary; collective earnings were distributed in equal parts to workers. Redistribution meant an equal share of what was collectively produced but also entailed a review of wage categories based on "qualifications," which overemphasized the technical aspects of workers' knowledge. According to Carolina (with seven years' seniority before recuperation),

> Nobody has a position higher than anybody else's. If you sweep the floor, you'll earn the same as me, working in the finishing sector where I'm a presser. I mean, with

> the bosses, the apprentice earned 2 pesos an hour and, the qualified worker earned 15 pesos . . . Here it's different. Here, you earn 2 pesos; we all earn 2 pesos. You earn 10 pesos; we all earn 10 pesos. Or, 30 pesos (as happened once); we all took 30 pesos. Although it's a lot, it was 30 pesos for everybody. In equal parts. Otherwise, it would be as when there were bosses: they earn more, you kill yourself working, and the [boss] just walks around, looks at you and gets 2000 pesos a month and you're getting 100 pesos.

While gendered work was only partially modified, and traditionally "masculine" tasks remained, this no longer translated into wage hierarchies. Men and women received an equal income that resulted from an egalitarian view of profit distribution. Nevertheless, hierarchies continued in relation to tasks in terms of centrality and technical knowledge, and activities such as "cutting" or "tailoring" continued to be performed by men, and valued over "assembly," "sewing," or "cleaning." There were also different roles in the organization of labor, and some workers were designated "coordinators" on the basis of knowledge and seniority, as well as of their old job qualifications. Again, however, this distinction did not imply a difference in wage levels.

When production increased, there was discussion about whether new workers should be brought in to meet the higher demand. This was controversial, as some felt that the cost of new workers should be borne after the period of increased production. What duties, incomes, and obligations would be incurred by bringing in new workers? In the end, the Brukman cooperative followed the required legal route: worker cooperatives are governed by Law 20337 (1973), which stipulates that new workers should be incorporated as associate members. The National Institute of Associations and Social Economy (INAES) states that there may be a trial employment period. Brukman added new workers as associate members on a trial basis, where their income was the same as that of longstanding workers.[18] As has been noted elsewhere (Quijoux 2011; Rebón and Salgado 2009; Ruggeri 2011), the incorporation of new workers to worker-controlled factories poses one of the main problems. In some cases, differential wages have been implemented based on seniority (mainly distinguishing "old" from "new" associate members), or on the basis of responsibilities assumed. In Brukman, this differentiation—characterized by some as a process of "growing inequality" (*desigualación creciente*; Rebón and Salgado 2009)—was lightly incorporated.

There was also debate about the standing of the opinions of new workers in assemblies. Would their views count to the same extent as those who had fought to save Brukman in the aftermath of the December 2001 crisis? Moreover, who would be incorporated as new workers? Unemployed workers who had supported the struggle, or perhaps relatives of current and/or former workers who had valued job skills? There was increasing tension surrounding these debates over the level of commitment to the struggle versus commitment to production. For some, like Adriana, recuperation entailed assuming greater responsibilities for the factory work itself. For others, it meant a shared solidarity with other recuperations and worker collectives, while assuming a more combative approach to worker organization both at Brukman and throughout Argentina. There were discussions about the meaning of factory recuperation and the way in which its participants understood their worker and related identities.

Rotation—and how it helped shape work, income, collective politics, and other features of factory life—thus redefined the meaning of work under self-management. At the same time, the language of work and production permeated protest actions, shaping their formats, rhythms, and dynamics.

Struggle as Work

In April 2003, police violently evicted workers from Brukman for a third time; they then had a wall built around the plant to keep the workers out. With no immediate hope of re-entering the factory, workers constructed a camp (acampe) in front of the plant, which remained for nine months. The aim was to guard the plant against the possible removal of machines or other assets, and to continue the struggle by maintaining the demand for ownership of the source of employment. To that end, a tent was located in a square a few yards from the factory. Workers camped out 24 hours a day, supported by activists from other social and political organizations.

One morning—a typical day—a few minutes before ten o'clock, Brukman workers arrived for a shift in keeping with an established schedule; each signed the attendance book as they did on a working day at the factory. Those who had spent the night in the tent during their duty shift had woken up a few hours earlier. While waiting for the morning assembly to start, those who had just arrived put their things on a small shelf donated by a neighbor. As they did in the factory, they changed into their light-blue work smocks—a recognizable icon of their struggle. Luisa handed out the guard duty schedule and the branch address of the Banco Ciudad (Bank of the City of Buenos Aires), from where they received a subsidy they had negotiated for each collective member with the federal Social Welfare Division. On this particular day, the agenda included the visit of a legislator and a meeting with a representative of the Ombudsman's Office. Beatriz, Inés, and Rosana went shopping, to supplement the bags of food they received as donations. Irma and Margarita were knitting baby clothes and woolen socks while talking with female co-workers about their next guard duty. Irma told me that she was planning to sell her knitting in her neighborhood. Later, Diana told us that a client had come to offer them a job. She explained what it was about, and told them that some were thinking about sharing the work so that several people could do some work and receive some income.

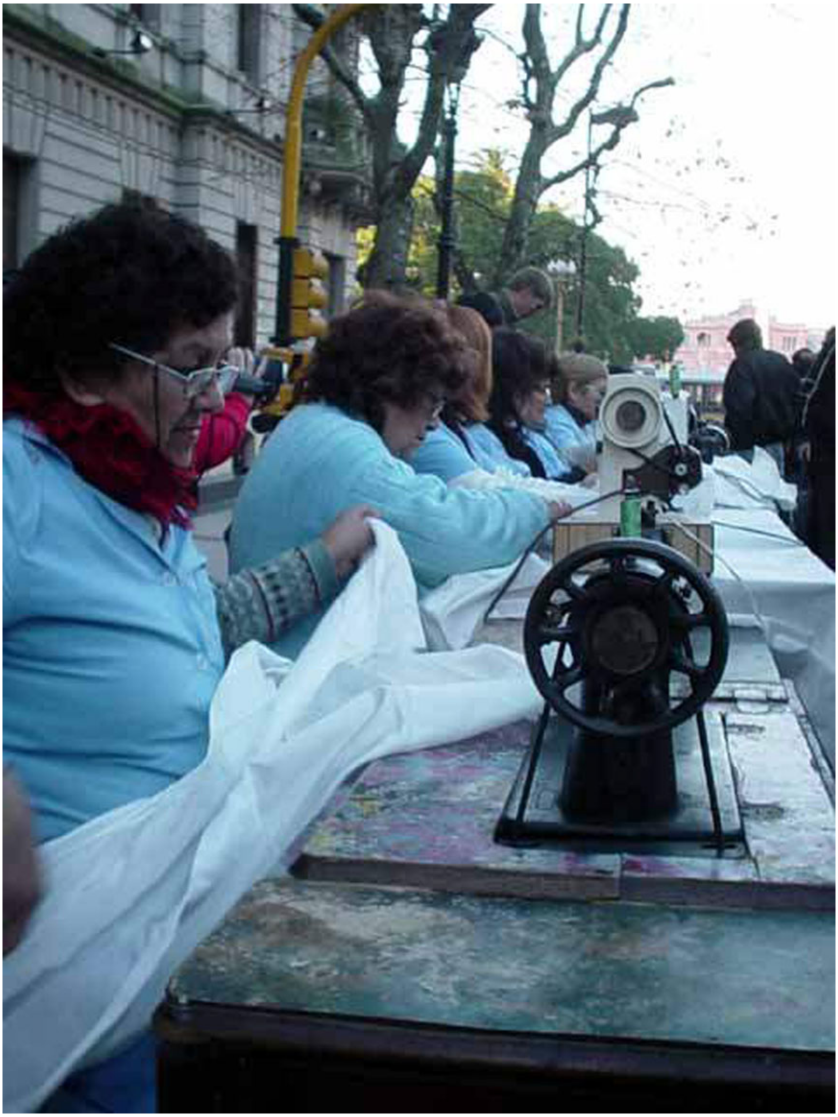

Figure 2 *Workers at the maquinazo, May 2003*
Photo from http://argentina.indymedia.org/news/2003/07/122393.php, accessed May 27, 2016.

During the acampe, arrival and departure schedules, guard duty shifts, and task assignments represented a reimagining of work. At the same time, and despite changes in schedules and tasks, the acampe was organized following postrecuperation day-to-day factory dynamics. In mid-2004, months after workers had re-entered the plant, Ana, a worker who had participated in the original occupation and had stayed through the third eviction, recounted the moment when she decided to go back to work while her female co-workers stayed in the acampe:

> (MI): Were you in the tent?
>
> A: Yes, but then I went back to work when my girl was two months old; I went back to work after three months [in the acampe]. I split up [with my husband] and . . . I started thinking, well, I have to go back to work . . .
>
> MI: Did your husband work?
>
> A: He didn't have a permanent job, and . . . I have to go back to work. I didn't want to come back here [to the plant] . . . [but] I didn't see an alternative at the time. If I'd seen something better, I'd have gone somewhere else . . . And when I came back [to the acampe] three months after the ruckus [the eviction and repression], the tent was there and I showed up and some of them told me: "well, if you come back, if you are sure you are coming back, stay, but as long as you don't leave again." Well, I came and I stayed [she laughs].

Like the factory, the tent was defined as a workspace: this relocated the physical area of work onto a new geographical plane, although it had none of the referential marks of a factory. Staying in the tent incurred shop floor obligations, such as guard duty, spending the night, and carrying out tasks relating to the struggle to recover the source of work, including mobilizing support, blocking streets, negotiation with civil servants, and guaranteeing the food supply. Tent space was highly regulated and everybody had assigned jobs and responsibilities. Although after recuperation, the factory had also been the space in which the struggle took place, here, the relationship was reversed, and the space of the struggle was also the workplace. The work of recovering the factory took the form of political action, rooted in the mode of productive work.

Guard duty for the factory was organized in a similar way: groups of workers were formed, rotating through shifts. Some workers even started living in the factory, as in the case of Agustín, who in 2001 was unemployed and living with his mother and brothers. Agustín started "accompanying" his mother in doing the paperwork and on demonstrations, and ended up taking "guard hours." He observed that he wished "to be here all the time and invest a part of my youth here. 'Cos I could be somewhere else." Thus, being on guard duty came to be part of the work routine, and it was defined and overseen as such. Guard duty started once work tasks had finished, and lasted until the next day. For those on duty, then, the "workday" extended for the entire 24 hours. For some workers, it was difficult to guarantee their presence on guard duty, which, when required, was resolved by an individual being replaced by other workers or family members. Unlike men, women on guard duty who had responsibility for their children brought them with them, a practice they also followed at demonstrations or other mobilizations.

A related form of political action derived from productive work was manifest in the *maquinazo*. Initiated to block a municipal law transferring Brukman ownership to the city, the maquinazo consisted of occupying a road on which donated sewing machines had been set up. Workers (mainly women) sewed, sometimes for hours, dressed in their iconic light-blue smocks. Most of the time these actions took place in front of the fenced-off factory, but sometimes in front of City Hall, or the municipal legislature. This protest action aimed to show how members of the collective worked—proving capacity, willingness, skills, and drive. The maquinazo was adopted by other social actors, including the unemployed worker movements. In terms of symbolism and in practice, the street was not blocked to impede work, but to enable it. In 2005, for example, BAUEN hotel workers blocked the street with the tools of their trade—chairs, tables, and beds. Placards read, "We are defending our 126 job positions" and "For a Law that allows us to work" (Faulk 2008).

These practices activated historical constructions of labor in Argentina, which, even if they were shared by other organizations such as unemployed worker movements, acquired specific qualities in this instance: they pointed to the possibility of recovering the source of labor—their factory—which was expressed in terms of a wish for dignified and genuine work. These expressions recalled past ways of working and living. They included factory work and social protections of wage relations, as defined in Argentina during the Peronist government: that is, they encompassed job stability, retirement benefits, and rights associated with being a "worker" (healthcare, education, and fair wages, for example). A significant amount of research has noted that during this period, social security and social rights expanded and functioned as a legitimation of the model of accumulation (Lo Vuolo and Barbeito 1998; Grassi, Hintze and Neufeld 1994; Neffa 1998); the concept of "worker" established the basis for "social citizenship" (James 1990), which defined rights as universal (Grassi, Hintze and Neufeld 1994). While social rights were a complement to labor rights, social policies of public assistance were of residual significance, and pointed to populations unable to integrate into the labor market for reasons such as disability or incapacity. Instead, poor unemployed people were constituted as "embarrassing subjects" and equated with beggars (Lo Vuolo and Barbeito 1998; Grassi, Hintze and Neufeld 1994). The model of stable and protected work—with attitudes to those in need of assistance as its dark side—constituted the definition of dignified and genuine work.

These ideas make sense in the context of the opposition to forms of state intervention in employment issues during the 1990s. A set of welfare-focused programs was introduced for those excluded from the labor market (Grassi 2003; Lindenboim and Danani 2003; Lo Vuolo and Barbeito 1998a,b).

Financed by international institutions and aimed at mitigating the collateral effects of neoliberal adjustment (Cross and Freytes Frey 2009), Temporary Employment Programs (PET) followed the logic of the World Bank's workfare model. They assigned financial help to employers so that workers would be guaranteed the minimum wage (Gautié 2002). Many, however, did not consider employment funded by social plans to be a genuine type of work (Fernández Álvarez and Manzano 2007). Bearing in mind the failed social policies of the 1990s, job losses, poverty of the era, and meagerness of the minimum wage, recovered factory workers instead demanded state policies that would provide better jobs and incomes and that would enable workers to control their source of employment.

There were related worker demands on the state, including those of the unemployed peoples' organizations. Like the Brukman acampe, unemployed protesters saw their protests as work (Cross 2010; Manzano 2008; Quirós 2006; Rius 2011). Their activities were organized, regulated, and defined in a manner that reproduced a factory schedule, including work timetables and the distribution of responsibilities. However, in the case of the recuperadas, while the struggle for recognition was defined and organized through patterns of work, protest actions took the format, practices, and discourse of the world of work, and in particular of factory life. In this way, a new language of protest was developed, which was reminiscent of that elaborated by Roseberry (1994); it articulated that "dignity through work" justified, sustained, and legitimized the mechanisms workers deployed to achieve a decent standard of living. This new type of protest united hegemonic values of the meaning of work, in the ethical sense highlighted by Bauman, in which work is set up as a noble and hierarchized activity (1998), with political constructs that, in Argentina, have a long history that defines work as a means of guaranteeing social rights (Grassi, Hintze and Neufeld 1994; James 1990). This history, in spite of transformations in labor realities (in particular, the growth of job precariousness and informality), continues to be of significance in regional hegemonic cultural constructions of work (Danani and Grassi 2009). The mobilizations described here made it possible for the workers to commit to the struggle for the factory through the development of both a creative form of protest action and collective organization methods formed from elements of their daily work routines.

Conclusion

This article has analyzed day-to-day life in a recuperada seeking to recover a continuum of working practices by illustrating their unplanned and creative nature and their significance within the framework of the broader processes within which they developed. Workers do not act freely and entirely outside the relations of domination that impose limits on their actions (and on what it is possible to do and to think); neither do they act entirely from a false consciousness imposed on them from outside. Thus, I have shown how the demands the workers developed during and through the process of recuperating the factory were modeled on hegemonic categories relating to work, such as dignity and productivity, out of which it was possible for them to construct the idea and practice of worker self-management.[19]

This kind of study allows us to appreciate the creativity of these political practices and to see how they blur the boundaries between hidden transcripts and public actions, leading to a questioning of the supposed hierarchy between everyday resistance and open forms of confrontation. It illustrates the difficulties of categorizing the recuperadas and, in a broader sense, their practices of mobilization and collective organization, as new forms of political action or alternative spaces for organizing work itself. Here, I have shown that the organization of work (space) and the practices of mobilization developed by the recuperadas cannot be analyzed as separate dimensions. One of the most substantive contributions of worker-controlled factories is precisely the way in which work and politics are articulated on a daily basis. Thus, such factories can be considered in terms of their daily practices of "struggle" and "work," which generate an innovative process of demand. They provide a form of day-to-day construction, in which the participants invented from their life experiences a new form of politics *and* work. As Guttman (1993, 2012) postulates, this everyday life is not "hidden," but takes the form of daily resistance, based on public exposure to practices of struggle that are rooted in work.

Finally, this article contributes to a conceptualization of political practices that blur the boundaries between hidden and public actions. It questions the assumed hierarchies between everyday resistance and forms of open confrontation. I draw here on Scott's (1987) work on everyday forms of resistance as a continuum, where purpose does not necessarily precede action. The aim is not to deny that subaltern groups can in their everyday practices accept and resist forms of domination, but to recognize the creative potential of those practices—the meaning of which is constituted in the making. To assume a contradictory nature in these political practices (Creham 2002; Guttman 2012) demands that we move from a lineal and teleological logic to an emphasis on creative actions: research should be guided by what presents itself as discontinuous or even reversible. Workers who develop everyday actions when survival is at stake are frequently subject to suspicion regarding the transformative or disruptive nature of their actions. This article helps us to understand the political meaning and analytical relevance of these actions for those who carry them out.

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Notes

[1] Workers said that from 1998 onwards, the owners had suspended the payment of social security contributions; since 2000, they had also stopped the payment of fortnightly wages, replacing them with a weekly voucher (*vale*). This voucher was in fact a prepayment, which started to drop in value during 2001, reaching the amount of five AR pesos (due to convertibility law one AR peso was equivalent to one US dollar) the week before the occupation. They stated that the wage devaluation was accompanied by the removal of machinery and the owners' personal belongings from the factory, and the announcement of a general vacation for all workers. These actions were assumed to be "asset stripping" and closure of the plant.

[2] This program targeted unemployed heads of household with children under 18 years old, as well as people with disabilities, or homes with a pregnant head of household, or wife who did not receive any other state aid. It was later extended to young unemployed people and persons over 60 years old with no access to pension. They received a monthly amount of 150 AR pesos (150 US dollars) in exchange for participating in communitarian or other productive training activities. The program reached two million beneficiaries in the first year.

[3] There were three Trotskyist political parties involved—Partido de los Trabajadores Socialistas, Partido Obrero, and Democracia Obrera—but also Maoist ones, such as the Partido Comunista Revolucionario. See Quijoux (2011) for an analysis of these organizations in the first months of Brukman's recuperation.

[4] For example, Brukman workers held a prominent position at the World Social Forum in Argentina in August 2002.

[5] Unemployment rates reflect these transformations: at the beginning of the 1980s, the rate of unemployment was 2.6 percent, reaching 7.5 percent by the 1990s; by the end of 2001 it had reached 18.3 percent and by 2002 it stood at 21.5 percent. Rates of poverty showed a similar trend: in the 1980s the rate of poverty was 29.8 percent; by 2002 it had reached 57.5 percent (EPH-INDEC 2003). At the same time, the percentage of wealth the richest population appropriated in the 1990s climbed from 34.8 percent to 42.1 percent while the percentage of people with an income lower than half the average rose from 39.1 percent to 47.9 percent (CEPAL 2002–03).

[6] Names have been altered throughout for reasons of confidentiality.

[7] The MNFRT was formed in 2002, and was led by a social and political activist from the Partido Justicialista. It focused on the legality of recuperation processes, based on the right to work and economic viability. For an analysis of the movement, see Gracia and Cavalieri (2007), Fernández Álvarez (2007), and Rebón (2007).

[8] Another significant feature was the workers' history in relation to migration: more than half are migrants from within the country, especially from the northern provinces; in some other cases, they originated from bordering countries (Paraguay and Bolivia).

[9] The article is the result of an ethnographic study consisting of a two-tiered fieldwork approach carried out between 2002 and 2005: (1) I followed ten cases from across different sectors of production (three from metalworking, two from printing, two from the food sector, one from textiles, and one from the health sector), engaging in observation, in-depth interviews with workers, leaders of umbrella organizations, and representatives from public offices; (2) I carried out an in-depth analysis, most of

which took place in a factory. I interviewed 50 workers from Brukman, 20 workers in other recuperadas from within Buenos Aires, 12 leaders and lawyers from the recovered businesses organizations, and ten officials from public offices. Most of this analysis corresponds to data produced in this period of study; I have also taken into account later data based on revisits between 2008 and 2012.

[10] Scott (1985, 1990), again following Thompson (1978), noted that the development of these practices influenced the experience of class and the interpretation that the dominated formed relations of production based on their experience (i.e., that these forms of resistance were in themselves an expression of class struggle). See Sivaramakrishman (2005).

[11] "To clean" here means to remove the basting from the fabric once the piece of clothing has been sewn.

[12] "To refine" in this context is the action of cutting the leftover edges of the fabric from a piece of clothing.

[13] This task refers to the action of sewing the waistband to the trousers.

[14] The expropriation of bankrupt factories was one of the first demands of the workers from the recuperadas. In the city of Buenos Aires, 19 laws of expropriation were passed and sanctioned during 2002 and 2003, which covered 80 percent of worker-controlled factories in that region. The organizations demanded the passage of a national law of expropriation to cover all these factories. Instead, the lawyers considered each case separately and demanded from the workers legal evidence proving their right to ask for state intervention. For further detail, see Fernández Álvarez (2010).

[15] This account of one day at the factory is a reconstruction based on my observations between 2002 and 2005. This daily dynamic remained largely unchanged during visits carried out between 2008 and 2012.

[16] One of the most important subsidies is the Self-Managed Work Program (Programa de Trabajo Autogestionado), implemented in 2003 by the Ministry of Labor and Social Security. The aim is to "maintain and generate jobs, promoting and strengthening productive units self-managed by their workers, and improve their competitively and sustainability, as well as health and security conditions for workers, promoting the improvement of work conditions and work environment." The program grants individual subsidies for 12 months for cooperative associates, and the financing of investment projects aimed at capital, equipment, and infrastructure development: http://www.trabajo.gov.ar/promoempleo/autogestionadas2.asp. The program is part of wider public policies implemented from 2003 onwards, orientated toward "social inclusion" and work promotion.

[17] According to a 2011 national survey, 42 percent of recovered enterprises carry out this kind of work; around 30 percent depend almost exclusively on it (Ruggeri et al. 2011).

[18] A key demand of the collective organizations is for the replacement of this legislation by a new version, which takes into consideration the current situation of worker cooperatives.

[19] As I have remarked elsewhere (Fernández Álvarez 2010), the particular features of this case illustrate the way the demand process was shaped by state interventions in employment issues; it also highlights the limits that hegemony imposed on the development of recovered enterprises, defining a language of contention that required workers to show themselves as subjects capable of self-managed production.

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