How do Migrant Workers Respond to Labour Abuses in "Local Sweatshops"?

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Abstract: This article aims to provide empirical evidence on understanding how migrant workers' responses to labour exploitation in low-wage economies are articulated. Inspired by the low levels of conflict among workers in small urban sweatshops in Italy and Argentina, we ask ourselves what contextual and subjective factors prevent workers from organising collectively. Here we argue that in order to understand the nature of their responses, it is necessary to consider not only the organisation of the labour process, but also the class divisions within migrant communities. We also bring in briefly the role of the state in (mis)regulating migrant labour exploitation. We conclude by showing that workers' responses are highly individualised and that community leaders with economic interests in sweatshop economies may play a role in securing their continuation by channelling the workers' responses towards the defence of the "ethnic economy".

Keywords: migrant workers, sweatshops, human trafficking, ethnic economy, low-wage economy

Introduction

This article is inspired by a statement made by a union leader in Prato when referring to the complete lack of organisation among workers in small urban sweatshops in Italy: "a Marxist theorist would never understand why so many thousand workers living under such conditions in an Occidental country with full access to labour rights do not get organised". In this article we aim to provide empirical evidence on addressing this issue, or rather, understanding how migrant workers' responses to labour exploitation are articulated. Inspired by the very low levels of conflict within large "sweatshop economies" based on extreme labour exploitation in Italy and Argentina, we ask ourselves what contextual and subjective factors prevent migrant workers from organising collectively in the defence of their rights. In so doing we draw on the lessons from years of anti-sweatshop activism in Buenos Aires, as well as on our empirical research in Buenos Aires and Prato (nearby Florence). Sweatshops in both cities mainly produce fashionwear sold by all kinds of brands and retailers: whether they are high-end fashion houses (e.g. Dolce & Gabbana, Chanel), large retail chains (e.g. Zara, M&S), high-street clothing, or fake

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items for outdoor markets, the garments worn mainly by young women in northern Italy and in Argentina are highly likely to be produced in sweatshops located in the proximities of the markets.

During the last decade or so, labour geographers have produced a profuse body of research on migrant workers' organisation. Wills (2005, 2009) has focused on labour struggles involving migrant and other minority workers in low-paid jobs in London. Stressing the current challenges faced by trade unions, especially the difficulties they have for representing the demands of migrants and minority workers with the development of new migrant divisions of labour, Wills (2005), Wills and Linneker (2013) and Holgate (2015) analysed community unionism and gave voice to struggles of workers in low-wage economies, from the workplace to city-wide campaigns. Similarly, analysing the poor ability of workers in "the new economy" to deal with conflicts at work, Holgate et al. (2011) also pointed at "the increasing individualisation of employment in the context of decades of union decline". In their words:

> the move away from the collectivisation of the employment relationship to one where individualisation is the norm has left workers with problems cast adrift, unable to deal with bullying, harassment, victimisation, discrimination and non-compliance with the contract of employment (Holgate et al. 2011:1088).

Further to the vulnerabilities faced by migrants in precarious jobs, this context of increasing individualisation of the employment relations also shapes their responses to abuses in the destination countries. This reality helps us understand why in the cases we address here migrants' responses to labour exploitation are mostly individual.

More recently, research has been conducted to address the living conditions of migrants in London, with a special emphasis on Latin Americans (Evans et al. 2007; McIlwaine et al. 2011). This research has examined the experiences of migrants and the "coping strategies" (McIlwaine 2005) or "tactics" (Datta et al. 2007) they develop individually in order to "carve a little for themselves" in the city. Although highly descriptive, the first-hand experience and the insightful empirical evidence provided by these colleagues constitute key advances in migration studies, labour geography and industrial relations, especially in linking production and social reproduction to better understand the actual context shaping migrants' experiences in the global city.

However, geographical literature has failed to address the internal dynamics of specific groups of migrants, and has instead tended to conflate groups of migrants strongly differentiated by class (McIlwaine et al. 2011), or even to idealise migrants as inherently having altruist intentions when developing networks (see van Liempt and Sersli 2012). Our empirical research illustrates the existence of community leaders having a key role in hiding and reproducing class differences *within* specific groups of migrants and profiting from the vulnerability of fellow co-nationals. They are found to play a key role in the design and implementation of the everyday practices that secure the continuation of the several profitable businesses related to immigration (garment sweatshops, restaurants, money transfer, travel agencies, etc.), many of which are sustained by extreme labour exploitation.

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Through a comparative study between a core and a peripheral country, we look at the working conditions of migrants in "local" garment sweatshops hidden in the city's landscape, whose agency is severely reduced by the conditions in which they arrived to the host city (which can include undocumented migration and/or human trafficking) and their spatial isolation not only from other workers but also from the broader society (e.g. workers locked in sweatshops).

The article starts with a description of the methods used, followed by an account of the origin of local sweatshops since the late 1970s, emphasising the case studies. Then we engage with the analysis of the diverse issues that explain the low level of workers' organisation in sweatshops, focusing on the organisation of the labour process and on how migrants' subjectivities and motivations are moulded in the sweatshop economy. The next section deals with the role of certain community leaders in preventing collective organisation and conflicts within the sweatshop economy—notably through the promotion of a politics of identity. We then ask how state regulations relate to the issue, to conclude the article with an analytical proposal for addressing the study of migrants' responses to labour exploitation.

Methods and Data Collection

The research reported here is part of two doctoral theses. One is a comparative research of sweatshops in Prato and Buenos Aires (fieldwork carried out in 2007/2008 and update interviews in 2012) and the other one (currently being conducted) explores the case of sweatshops in Buenos Aires. Data on the latter case are also drawn from the results of a recent study by the Ministry of Labour (coordinated by one of us) and from our experience of activism in a local NGO called La Alameda from 2007 to 2013. The latter consisted of daily support to migrants seeking to regularise their immigration status, collecting evidence to report labour abuses in sweatshops, and several attempts at organising sweatshops' workers cooperatives.

In adopting a "comparison-as-learning" approach (McFarlane 2010), we found that the evidence from both cases worked in a complementary way: in terms of the main arguments presented here, partial outcomes in one case were generally confirmed with further data from the other case. In Prato, due to the tougher migration policies and controls of the EU and the longer distance—and higher costs—involved in the transportation of migrants from China, there is a higher level of "clandestinity" of the sweatshop economy. This has made it more difficult to access first-hand data regarding certain issues—e.g. we could not interview workers—and surely has had consequences for the preparation of this paper. Nevertheless, this has not undermined the mutually supportive nature of the cases in regards to the findings presented here. For example, in relation to the role of community leaders in influencing the responses of workers to labour exploitation, which draws mainly on the Buenos Aires case, partial findings in the Prato case—derived from a quote from a local government official—were found to be confirmed in the Buenos Aires case, where our everyday contact with migrants at La Alameda's place helped us gain access to privileged data.

Further to our daily contact with sweatshop workers in Buenos Aires, we conducted 130 in-depth interviews—an hour on average—with officials, workers, union

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leaders, social movements and scholars in both locations. Insight on the actual conditions of living in the sweatshops in Prato was gained through media reports and through interviews with three labour inspectors—the only Italian authorities with access to sweatshops.

"Local Sweatshops"

Literature on the changes in the organisation of garment production globally has emphasised the rise of export-led sweatshops in peripheral countries (Collins 2003; Gereffi and Memedovic 2003; Merk 2009), paying little attention to small and medium inner-city sweatshops in large cities, both in peripheral and core economies. The fact that sweatshops continue to be understood as a matter affecting poor workers in peripheral countries brings about the invisibilisation of the latter. As asserted by several scholars (Bonacich and Appelbaum 2000; Green 1997; Mitter 1985; Morokvasic et al. 1986; Phizacklea 1990; Ross 2004), and as shown by media reports (BBC 2009; *Los Angeles Times* 2012; RAI 2008), sweatshops are also a matter of core economies, especially in large cities like Los Angeles, New York, London, Paris and others.

In order to avoid confusion between these two types of sweatshops, we differentiate between "international sweatshops" and "local sweatshops". The former are mass producers of standardised garment (jeans, men's plain t-shirts, underwear, etc.) and work at the order of western brands and retailers and their intermediaries. Local sweatshops, instead, are small or medium workshops located in the proximities of the markets, which generally produce small batches of specialised fashionwear for brands and retailers that sell mostly within the same country.

Describing a "typical sweatshop" is a hard task. The informal nature of the business allows entrepreneurs to change the form and size of their businesses in response to high and slack seasons, contractors with different needs, etc. With this caveat, we will assume that sweatshops in Buenos Aires generally employ the sweatshop's owners and their families, plus 4–20 workers (Lieutier 2010), whereas in Prato the typical sweatshop would be composed of the owner, his family and 8–10 workers (Ceccagno 2003:7). Some sweatshop owners may have several sweatshops, in which case they usually split production into several workplaces to remain "invisible" to the authorities and to divide their labour force. The overwhelming majority of workers, as well as the owners, are transnational migrants. In Buenos Aires, local authorities (the Ministry of Labour of the City, quoted in Lieutier 2010) calculate that there exist about 5000 sweatshops, where about 30,000 Bolivian immigrants are subjected to dreadful conditions.[1] In the case of Prato, there are 3500 garment companies in the hands of Chinese citizens (Camera di Commercio Prato 2012), the large majority of which are believed to operate in sweatshop conditions.[2] While the official figure of formal Chinese immigrants in the Province is just above 8000 (Provincia di Prato 2013), authorities at the City Council estimate that there are about 10,000 irregular Chinese migrants, the majority of which are exploited in sweatshops (information provided by Franco[3] from Prato's City Council).

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The emergence of local sweatshops was noted in the late 1970s, when "the first reports on the 'new sweatshops' were in the New York press" (Ross 2004:26). It is linked to the strategies adopted by the main fashion companies to face economic hardships in the 1970s, when stagnation and the increasing economic instability hit the sector significantly (Morokvasic et al. 1986; Phizacklea 1990). In that decade, following strategies previously developed by large manufacturers of sports garments (e.g. Nike and Adidas) the main players of the fashion industry reorganised their businesses in pursuit of expanding their markets, achieving greater flexibility and cutting labour costs, thereby triggering shifts that later on were adopted by less important firms and that shaped the way new players came into the industry since then. On the one hand, firms invested more resources in fashion marketing: to face dropping consumption, there was a massification of fashion-sensitive clothing, especially that for young women, who had been traditionally left aside from the consumption of fashionable clothing (Lipovetsky 1994). Indeed, in the cases analysed in this research a myriad of companies emerged in the 1980s to cover an emerging market of "mass fashionwear". As Carlo (an Italian manufacturer) stated, by then "women were asking for clothes like the ones being advertised in fashion magazines by high end fashion houses, but cheaper ... We saw this pulling market and decided to produce those clothes copying the designs and just using cheaper cloth."

On the other hand, greater investments in marketing put even more pressure on labour costs. Therefore, the largest companies engaged in a thorough reorganisation of their businesses: they reduced operations in their factories and subcontracted the most labour-intensive phases to both contractors in the periphery and domestically. Since then, virtually no companies enter the clothing business investing in big factories.

In this way, thousands of unionised factory workers were laid off and given machines to continue working for their employers from home, thus becoming workers under piece-rate pay and precarious employment. But in numerous cities the demand for homeworkers was also covered by migrants, as shown by Morokvasic (1987) for the case of Paris, Phizacklea (1990) for London, Green (1997) for New York and Paris, and Bonacich and Appelbaum (2000) for Los Angeles. The availability of large pools of immigrants "denied access to the mainstream labour economy through racial labour segmentation" is crucial for the development of "ethnic enclaves where all labour laws are routinely neglected" (Bonacich and Appelbaum 2000:13).

These processes can be seen in Italy and Argentina, where since the early 1980s (in Italy) and the mid-1980s (in Argentina) factory closures were followed by the development of sweatshop economies managed by migrant entrepreneurs who manufacture garment for brands and retailers (as well as for informal outdoor markets). When large factories—like Gucci's in Florence—started to shut down or shrink to only primary activities (like cloth cutting), the demand for subcontractors was high and the pay was accordingly acceptable. Little by little, migrant petty entrepreneurs already settled in these cities entered the business by opening their own workshops and offering jobs to relatives and friends from their home regions. In Prato, migrants who opened the first workshops—some of whom are today's

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prominent migrants—came towards the mid-1980s from Zhejiang and Fujian (Ceccagno 2003:9), whereas in Buenos Aires it was Korean migrants who opened the first workshops to supply this demand, employing firstly Korean labour but later on relying on already settled Bolivian workers—mainly female—who entered the sector as homeworkers and later on opened their own workshops.

Demand for manufacturers remained high as new, smaller companies entered the fashion industry in order to supply the growing demand for "mass fashionwear". As these workshops multiplied, cut-throat competition started to undermine the pay offered by contractors, until they exceeded the demand and the pay dropped to levels that make it impossible for the subcontractors to register their workers and pay a living wage. This is when the practice of recruiting workers through deceitful job offers and mechanisms of human trafficking became widespread. Workshop owners who could bear the growing competitiveness secured themselves a workforce by these means. Today, workers at the bottom of the job ladder in Prato have been arriving since the second half of the 1990s from the north-eastern regions of Heilongjiang, Jilin and Liaoning (Manchuria). In Buenos Aires, Bolivian workers from Cochabamba and La Paz were attracted by the strength of the Argentinian currency during the 1990s and could use networks established with neighbours and relatives who had migrated before.

The move from factory to workshop production favoured the atomisation of the workforce, undermining collective organisation. Furthermore, due to the low barrier of entry in this industry, several workers are motivated to accept long work days, which help them to save money more rapidly in order to open their own workshops. This is one of the key ways in which workers respond to exploitation —individually—due to the possibility of self-employment.

Today, these local sweatshops offer domestic brands and retailers quick response to their requirements and the cheapest labour costs available locally.

Why is Workers' Organisation So Low?

Sweatshop economies in Buenos and Prato are organised to satisfy the needs of fashion brands and retailers. The low level of labour conflicts allows appalling working conditions to persist, on which the companies' earnings rely. This can be explained by a number of reasons, encompassing the organisation of the labour process, the interests that motivated workers to migrate in the first place, and the ways in which migrant workers' subjectivities are moulded in the sweatshop economy, from the subtle commentaries of an isolated sweatshop owner to the active role of a few powerful community leaders in defending the continuation of the system.

The Organisation of the Sweatshop System

Working conditions vary greatly from one sweatshop to another. While informality, poor health and safety conditions and low wages are the norm, some workers may negotiate—individually—better conditions than others. This is the case for the most skilled workers, whereas those who show ability for managing work groups may become managers. However, the newcomers generally face dreadful conditions,

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like retention of their salaries, shifts of up to 16 hours, and—for those who were trafficked—obligation to work for one specific boss until they pay off the debt. Many of them live under cramped conditions in the sweatshops (e.g. on an upper floor) and may even be locked in. Sometimes the pay amounts to about 40% of the bargaining salary. Within the sweatshops, domestic life and the workplace are intermingled, and at the end of the day the latter prevails over the former. The sweatshops' owners then consider the salary as "complementary" since the reproduction of the workforce is—precariously—ensured.

Despite this, the organisation of the labour process works towards securing the permanence of workers and the low levels of conflict. First, the labour force is divided into thousands of small workshops scattered around certain neighbourhoods, where workers are isolated from each other, therefore complicating the organisation of large protests. Furthermore, the complexity of the subcontracting chain makes it difficult for the workers to clearly identify who is responsible for their working conditions. Several workers we interviewed said that when they point at the boss, the latter blames the contractor and complains about the pay and conditions s/he imposes.

Piece-rate pay is another mechanism used to discipline labour. The pay is negotiated individually between the workers and the sweatshop owners—despite legislation ruling minimum rates—and it allows the latter to regulate the work intensity (Marx 2002). This mechanism puts the responsibility for the workers' earnings on the workers themselves. During high seasons, they engage in fierce competition against their workmates (and against themselves) in order to increase their earnings by means of their *individual* effort. A low income is perceived as a consequence of the workers' poor performance. Collective efforts to claim for a higher pay are therefore very rare.

Sometimes, the conditions of the recruitment and migration processes partly explain the ways in which workers respond to labour abuses. Through radio, adverts in shops and a broad range of family connections, many workers are offered better jobs than those available in their home countries. Transport to their destination is paid by the traffickers, though in the case of Prato workers usually pay a part in advance. On arrival at their destination, workers find that the conditions and pay are different to what they had been told, and that they have a heavy debt to pay back. In Buenos Aires this debt is generally paid by working without pay at all for the first two to three months (Lieutier 2010), whereas in the case of Prato the debts are much higher: workers pay instalments out of the €300–400 they are paid a month, and they might finish paying off their debt after up to 4 years (information provided by Maria and Andreas, from the Labour Inspections Division). Furthermore, since the large majority of the workers have no previous experience in garment manufacturing when they arrive, their bosses also retain part of the salary based on the argument that they are teaching the workers how to do the job. The training is therefore paid for by the workers until they reach a certain productivity level. Other types of "discounts" may also apply (e.g. for accommodation and meals; or if they do not fulfil the established production quota). Deception and coercion for the purposes of labour exploitation are usual in these cases and these conditions amount to the UN's definition of human trafficking.[4] This crime has been widely reported in both cases by the media and by local organisations.[5]

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A number of threats made against those who leave and/or do not pay back their debts were mentioned by participants in both cases. These include beatings, reporting them to the border police, facing police brutality and prison, etc. In Buenos Aires, we learnt about several episodes of coercion and violence, be it moral, psychological or physical, ranging from the retention of passports to sexual abuse. In Prato, the use of threats to ensure the permanence of workers in the sweatshop seems to be more common, as revealed in our interviews with labour inspectors and in media reports (Der Spiegel 2006). Indeed, threats of death or retaliation against families back home were also mentioned.

All too often workers face some form of retaliation when leaving a sweatshop, especially lack of payment for their last days or weeks at work. In Buenos Aires, during high seasons the sweatshop owners may retain the workers' salary until the end of the season, paying only small amounts in order for the workers to get by or send remittances home. These payments are known as *adelantos* (advances). This forced saving is sometimes perceived as an advantage by the worker, who continues working for long hours motivated by the "large" amount s/he will be paid. However, this strengthens the power of the sweatshop owner to dictate the work intensity, as workers will avoid conflicts due to the—very real—possibility of losing their earnings. This is so especially because migrants do not have family or other support networks that may lend them a hand in case they quit their job. Carlos, an official from the Deputy Secretary of Labour in Buenos Aires who interviewed several workers, stated that this lack of urgent support is the most important single reason explaining the workers' permanence in the sweatshops. Language barriers and hostility from locals towards migrants (both usual in Prato) may make this even more difficult.

For the workers, in general, the decision to collectively make legitimate claims always brings with it certain risks, as is the case among workers facing informal and precarious employment in all sectors (cf. Gallin 2001). These include the loss of the job and, with it, the source of subsistence (and even of shelter in some cases) for them and their families. The lack of real alternatives (in terms of housing and decent jobs) for those who abandon a sweatshop is therefore a further consideration for those who may think about complaining. The sweatshop, in the end, offers them food and shelter, therefore however low the earnings may be, their work is secured and they can even save (little) money and send remittances back home.

Workers' Responses to Labour Exploitation

Despite the immense variety of experiences and interests that people who migrate have, it seems sensible to consider that, if approached by the workers' agency, economic migration is an individual (or family) strategy to achieve improved material conditions. The purpose is not to make a moral accusation against those who migrate. Instead, our argument here is that the decision to adopt an individual strategy speaks of the subjectivity of the migrant worker, and therefore should be considered in attempts at organising them collectively and at understanding their responses to labour exploitation.

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The way in which migrant workers tend to respond to labour exploitation depends mainly on their previous work history and the socioeconomic context in their home countries, and on their reasons for migration. Most workers do not have a tradition of union politics—or may have had negative experiences in their countries of origin—and may have never worked in a formal economy. In this sense, Pries (quoted in Caggiano 2013) highlights the relative nature of what is considered a "successful" experience, since it is contingent upon one's own references for measuring success. In the migration process, the "different systems of inequalities" in the countries of origin and destination act contradictorily, reshaping the migratory experience and allowing "the reproduction and persistence of inequalities, and even the violation of labour rights" (Caggiano 2013:7).

The temporal nature of migration—be it for months for Bolivians in Buenos Aires or for a few years for Chinese in Prato—also shapes the migrant's subjectivity. A worker who is in a certain space for just "a while" hardly ever engages in a protest—not to mention organising it—because, as pointed out by Caggiano (2013:6), "living these situations as if they were temporal, may as well mean living them as if they occurred in 'other' space, in which 'one' is not fully there because s/he is also partly in another space: that where migration started".

In both cases, workers generally migrate temporarily[6] and leave behind their background of informal and/or precarious jobs in their home countries, seeking to save as much money as possible in order to send remittances back home and/or to open up their own independent businesses, be it in the host or the home country (Bastia 2007; Ceccagno 2003). The centrality of remittances for the migrant workers' plans is illustrated by the statistics: according to a report of the Italian Chamber of Commerce, every year about 600 million Euros are sent from Prato to China (quoted in Pieraccini 2008), whereas remittances from Argentina to Bolivia amount to US$ 131 million yearly (BCB 2013).

For the workers to send remittances and/or save money, they must maximise the use of time. This is the case for two main reasons. First, the permanent possibility of deportation (be it real—as in Prato—or constructed—as in Argentina) puts pressure on the workers to earn as much as possible, so that they can recuperate what they have invested to migrate before being deported.[7] And second, as previously mentioned, piece-pay leads the workers to produce as many garments as possible in order to receive what is perceived as a higher pay. However, existing estimated breakdowns of costs show that in Buenos Aires workers receive a salary ranging from 2% to 3% of the price paid by the consumer (about 25% goes to the brand or retailer) (Montero 2016), whereas in Prato the sweatshop owner may receive €30 for manufacturing a handbag costing €800 in Florence's Viale Tornabuoni, meaning that a worker receives a maximum of 2.5% (RAI 2008).

Similar to the "tactics" that migrants develop to "get by" in London (May et al. 2007), workers seek to improve their situation individually, for example through moving to a workshop that offers better conditions, and the most skilled ones may actually prefer to work independently in order to negotiate better pay (Arcos 2012). Although they rarely enter the formal economy in this process, the high demand for workers makes it possible for the skilled and semi-skilled workers to achieve better conditions. These examples of upward mobility are then used as

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"models" by the sweatshop owners to motivate the search for individual strategies amongst their workers.

"Cultural Activism" Versus Class Politics

Conflicts within sweatshop economies in Prato and Buenos Aires do exist. During our research we learnt about minor examples of workers' resistance in Buenos Aires (like an attempt to create a Movement of Sweatshops' Workers which was rapidly contained by a group of sweatshop owners), whereas migrant leaders and union representatives interviewed did mention conflicts arising in specific workshops. These conflicts, however, did not lead to major events. The lack of interest in taking matters further by the majority of the workers only partially explains this. Civil society organisations providing immediate help to workers in need of food, medical assistance and the like play a role as well. Moreover, some community leaders related to the informal businesses linked to immigration seem to have a critical role in this sense.

Franco (from Prato's City Council) stressed that the City Council aims at "integrating Chinese immigrants with the local community", for which his Department offers them several free services like language courses and workshops about Italian culture and geography, Italian legislation and the like. He understands that this integration would put pressure on the employers to respect local legislation—especially labour legislation—because people around them would know what the usual practice should be. However, community organisations who offer every kind of assistance to the sweatshop workers and their families (from babysitters to doctors) are indeed complicating the activities of the Department by somehow replacing the state in neighbourhoods where the Chinese community lives. Similarly, in Buenos Aires, sometimes using the figure of "mutuales" (social enterprises), organisations provide services to their associates, who pay only a symbolic amount of money to get every kind of help, for instance legal assistance, help with their papers, food stuff, etc. Their leaders also take part in solving all kinds of conflicts—like gender violence and crime—within the community (Bastia and Montero Bressán 2016). In other words, they become referents of the community.

A number of these organisations may be analogous to those non-profit groups identified by Martin (2010) in poor neighbourhoods in Chicago. These organisations "construct partial, temporary, and contradictory responses in order to mitigate" the crisis of social reproduction faced by workers in the low-wage economy. Similar to her findings, and despite the genuinely good intentions that may mobilise them, they are found to "temporarily contain the contradictions by providing an immediate conflict-mitigating response" to particular situations, and in so doing they end up ensuring a workforce to employers that are "unable or unwilling to pay many workers a decent wage". For the cases addressed here, however, the evidence points to prominent members of migrant communities managing some key organisations in order to secure the several businesses linked to migration (garment sweatshops, "ethnic" restaurants, money transfer, travel agencies, etc.).

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In Franco's view, the interest behind the provision of services to Chinese citizens in Prato is to avoid their contact with local institutions. The isolation of workers and their families is fundamental for the continuation of the sweatshop system. Although, as a state agent, he might be willing to justify the failure of state policies in this area, he did mention that in Prato this only happens with migrants from China. Moreover, Silvio (from Prato's chamber of commerce) mentioned a study by Bankitalia that stated that the debts of the 3500 Chinese companies registered in Prato with Italian banks are extraordinarily low (actually close to zero Euro),[8] which may indicate that there are even financers within the community.[9]

In Buenos Aires, previous research (Bastia and Montero Bressán 2016) and the experiences of the organisations La Alameda and Simbiosis Cultural point at the existence of some community leaders who create their own organisations and their own radio stations and newspapers broadly known among Bolivians. These powerful community leaders have developed a discourse and a series of strategies aimed at naturalising sweatshop labour and keeping workers away from collective organising. By providing migrants with support and services and by fostering nationalism, they help to channel conflicts towards the defence of "Bolivians"—as opposed to Argentinians—and to keep workers within migrant networks and avoid their contact with the wider society, where becoming aware of the local legislation and meeting union members or local solidarity groups could be dangerous for the continuation of the sweatshop economy.

Members of these organisations are mostly owners of sweatshops seeking protection against both state controls and the unfair conditions imposed by contractors and their intermediaries (Arcos 2012; Gago 2011). The most powerful organisation (called ACIFEBOL) has repeatedly defended sweatshop owners, for instance by organising demonstrations to stop factory inspections.[10] It acts as a mediator between sweatshop owners and workers. When a conflict between them arises, this organisation first attempts to solve it at informal meetings at its premises. Both parties come together and try to reach an agreement with the mediation of the community leader, helping to keep authorities (or "Argentinians") out of their matters and fostering the practice of solving their problems amongst "paisanos" (co-citizens).

These organisations present themselves as "cultural" by using symbols that refer to the original people's "ancestrality" (Aymara and Quechua) (Gago 2011) and by organising social events like the celebration of religious fests that gather several thousands of migrants. Caggiano (2013:12) notes that the exaltation of national and cultural symbols in the context of discrimination makes it easier to associate oneself with co-nationals than with "locals". Indeed, the permanent insistence on extended racism in the broader local society contributes to fostering the workers' fear of the "outer world" and the image of some "community organisations" as a refuge for workers. One further aspect of this strategy is the presentation of conflicts with hierarchical actors in the production chain (brands and contractors) as interethnic conflicts. In this sense, the "Bolivian activists"—mobilised by the sweatshop owners—blame the contractors and the owners of brands as "Korean and Jewish slave drivers".[11] In the end, the "production of cultural difference ... through discourse and practices of inclusion and exclusion" (Bauder 2001) allows these

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organisations to become places of encounter and support in which the links with the national culture are emphasized.

As is usually the case, these constructed ethnic divisions do not strictly follow class divisions (Hall 1998). The hierarchical nature of capitalism—aimed at extracting a larger surplus from a segment of the labour force—needs to be legitimated without challenging the formal equality before the law. This immanent capitalistic contradiction between theoretical equality and practical inequality is resolved by means of the ethnification of the hierarchies at work. The role of the "ethnic associations" is supposed to be to guarantee the reproduction of stereotyped behaviours of the migrants as workers. This results in "an *ethnified* but productive labour force" that "does not organise as a class force that challenges the existence of the system as such" (Balibar and Wallerstein 1988:170).

There are over 100 radio stations owned by Bolivian citizens in Buenos Aires, but, as Roberto from Simbiosis Cultural told us, the most famous ones are owned by a few community leaders. These stations are powerful means for promoting their discourses and activities, since as Chela from La Alameda pointed out, "that voice in the radio may be the only thing that workers perceive from outside" the workshop. The discourse they promote is aimed at naturalising exploitation and protecting employers. The lawyer of one of these NGOs made clear one of the main arguments used by these organisations:

> Bolivians in Argentina progress more than any average Argentinian because they work much more. This is why there are more and more stores run by Bolivians day after day; they did not arrive here with money, they made it with effort. This effort is underpinned by an ancestral mandate of the Quechua culture: do not be weak. That mandate, passed along several generations, means that one should work *as much as it is necessary* (*Página/12*, December 2006, emphasis added).

In the development of this strategy, they "have erased the figure of the seamstress; there are no seamstresses and there are no workshops' owners anymore; now we are all 'Bolivian workers', which obscures the terrible inequalities existing within our community" (Estrada Vázquez 2010:26). As an example, in a demonstration to Buenos Aires' County Hall called by a community leader, he addressed the demonstrators—mainly workshop owners—stating that "we … brothers and sisters … we as workers have come here to tell the City's authorities that we are workers!" In sum, the discourse of ethnic belonging hides the inequalities within migrant groups and presents the issue as a matter confronting different "ethnicities" instead of different classes.[12]

This is not to say that all migrant organisations are involved in the defence of sweatshops. Some indeed fight against these, even if they are rather marginal in terms of their representativity and power to influence the political views of workers. Rather, our argument here is that there exists a "cultural activism" (Caggiano 2013) aimed at naturalising and justifying exploitation. Groups heading this activism are critical for understanding the lack of collective organisation amongst migrant workers in the low-wage economy.

Finally, the culturalist interpretation of labour exploitation also works for justifying the practices of local brands that subcontract sweatshop labour. Exploitation

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of migrants by migrants in local sweatshops is seen by locals as an intrinsically cultural issue of the members of the migrant communities in question. Under this logic, both "the Bolivians" in Buenos Aires and "the Chinese" in Prato are blamed for the very existence of sweatshops. In Prato, Salvatore and Antonio (members of the moderate CISL and UIL union confederations) stated that exploitation within "these Chinese companies" is due to their "millennial culture" of self-exploitation, whereas a small manufacturer stated that "these Chinese exploit each other". Likewise, in Argentina the majority of the union leaders and manufacturers, as well as officials at the national Ministry of Labour, blamed "the Bolivians" for exploitation in sweatshops. The argument was even used by a federal judge in a court decision, releasing the owners of a brand from accusations of exploitation of migrant labour under the argument that these are managed by groups of individuals who produce cooperatively using common property resources, "as in the Inca Empire" (Juzgado Nacional en lo Criminal y Correccional Nro, December 2008). In sum, these migrants are seen as groups of strangers coming into the cities with their own rules, one of which is a particular mode of exploitation (seen as self-exploitation).

The Role of the State

In our research experience, state regulations towards the sweatshop economies are found to be working against the workers' rights. First, the lack of support given to those reporting their working conditions prevents workers from approaching state authorities in search of assistance, since the most likely destiny for them is revictimisation (usually under worsened conditions). In the cases of those who are victims of trafficking, this goes against the UN Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons (2002)—known as the Palermo Protocol—signed by both countries. The protocol states that signatories should provide support to the victims, something that both countries systematically fail to do. The possibility of deportation also works in this direction. Indeed, even if deportation of victims of trafficking is strictly against the said protocol, Italy usually issues deportation records to workers found during inspections.[13] In Buenos Aires, deportation is unlikely because the immigration law forces the state to invite the workers to regularise their migration status before deporting them, but the lack of knowledge about the legislation helps the sweatshop owners to threaten reporting the workers to the police if they protest (cf. Montero Bressán and Ferradás Abalo 2015). Finally, inspections generally lead to the closure of the sweatshops and the loss of jobs, food and shelter for the workers and the sweatshop owners (when they only own one sweatshop). Brands and retailers at the top end of the chain do not face legal consequences. This is the case even in Argentina, where the law establishes the responsibility between the contractor and the owner of the workshop (Law 12713/41). Inspections (which in Buenos Aires involve police brutality to the workers) therefore end up with a closed workshop and several workers "in the streets".

This contributes to the mutual identification between the workers and the sweatshop owners, serving the said strategies of community leaders—at least in Buenos Aires—of engaging workers in the collective defence of the sweatshop system

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through a discourse of cultural belonging that hides the class inequalities within migrant communities.

Evidence collected for this research is rather conclusive of the involvement of consulates of the sending states in the workings of the sweatshop economies, mainly seeking to avoid the involvement of local institutions. An indicator of this for the case of Prato is the reaction of the Chinese consul at Florence to a report on sweatshops in the city. The report, on national TV (RAI 2008), exposed the working and living conditions of Chinese workers in sweatshops managed by Chinese entrepreneurs, emphasising the fact that they work as subcontractors of Italian and other European fashion houses. When approached by the media, instead of showing surprise and preoccupation, the consul said that the report constituted an open attack on "Chinese investors" in Prato, and he even threatened to relocate these investments: "I'm worried about the people of Prato, because if these factories shut down, the economy of the city will be damaged".[14]

The involvement of the Bolivian Consulate in Buenos Aires was also evident in past administrations. In arguing that consulates of neighbouring countries in Argentina usually seem to try to avoid problems with local institutions, Pereyra (2001:77) quotes the Bolivian consul as saying that "the dirty clothes must be washed at home", meaning that the problems between Bolivian immigrants must be solved amongst Bolivians. In line with this, in 2007 the NGO La Alameda discovered that over several years, informal meetings between sweatshop owners and workers had been held at the Consulate, with the participation of a community leader. Labour conflicts were solved at these meetings, leading to short-term solutions for the workers (partial payment of the amounts owed to them, jobs at other workshops, etc.).[15] The overall effect of keeping the Ministry of Labour away from these negotiations is, nevertheless, the continuation of the sweatshop economy.

In sum, for the cases addressed here, the consulates of the sending states also play an active role. The discursive and institutional arrangements settled by them facilitate the normal functioning of the sweatshop economies, with absolute disregard for labour exploitation.

Conclusions

The reorganisation of garment production worldwide during the last four decades has had dreadful consequences for the workers (Montero 2011). Both international and local sweatshops are today essential elements of the industry. The cases we addressed here are examples of shifts in the labour process, from factories to small workshops where workers pay for their training, the slack seasons, economic stagnations and even the unsuccessful marketing strategies of brands and retailers. Human trafficking and forced labour are found in these production chains. Responses to these widespread practices from the workers themselves are, however (and so far), poor, weak and strongly individualised.

The explanation lies in a complex net of causes that encompass the reorganisation of the labour process in the passage from Fordism to neoliberalism, the difficulties faced by the migrants as workers, the strategies of "cultural activism" fostered by some community leaders to avoid workers' mobilisation, and the

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institutional contexts. Regarding the labour process, the emergence of local sweatshops since the mid-1970s was mainly a consequence of the response of the main fashion garment brands to transformations in international political economy, especially to the increasing economic instability associated with the neoliberal turn. Shutting down the factories and subcontracting production to local workshops was a strategy to pass the risks onto the subcontractors, and to divide their workers.

Given the extent of illegal practices in the sweatshop economies—which contributes to naturalising these practices—and the lack of state support, workers do not see any potential in organising, whereas they do see concrete immediate risks. Incentives for demanding better working conditions are even lower due to the risks associated with protesting, which are shared by all workers in the informal economy and include the sudden loss of a job. In such cases, migrant workers (especially the newcomers) find themselves with more limited options to deal with this, especially because they have limited access to social networks that could mitigate the situation. This is even more the case for workers who live in the sweatshops, as losing their jobs means losing their food and shelter as well. Furthermore, an especially vulnerable situation is that of trafficked migrants, who have a heavy debt to pay back before being able to freely decide where to live and work. The context of increasing individualisation of the employment relations also discourages attempts at organising collectively in the defence of their rights as workers.

Here we have analysed inequalities within migrant communities in search of "the multiple social divisions in play" (Castree et al. 2004:60) that shape workers' political agendas and difficult class politics, therefore contributing to perpetuate economic activities based on labour exploitation. In this sense, we addressed the political role of some community leaders in securing the "normal" functioning of the business related to migrant networks. Some of the largest sweatshop owners —who employ dozens of workers in several workshops—gather in organisations that call themselves "ethnic" or "national" in order to channel potential responses from the workers towards the defence of national and/or ethnic values. In line with this, actions by local organisations and institutions are presented as racist intromissions that are dangerous for the workers, in contrast with fellow co-nationals who allegedly help each other. Such discourse, routinely and repeatedly promoted on the radio, has a powerful influence on the workers' political agendas, and contributes to securing the continuation of the system and the businesses related to it.

Following on from this, we hope the article makes an analytical contribution to the study of the organisation of migrant workers and workers in the low-wage economy. Conflating groups of migrants as if all individuals in these situations faced similar problems at work, and looking at migrant organisations as inherently having good intentions might lead to inaccurate conclusions. In looking at class divisions and how they shape the political agendas of migrants, we found that a more nuanced approach to the issue should recognise that migrant communities are heterogeneous groups with sometimes significant class divisions that influence the kind of political activism that may arise from these collectives.

Finally—on a more militant note—we understand that in order to fight migrant labour exploitation, it is critical to counter the highly individualised nature of workers' responses and to unmask the role of community leaders with economic interests in

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the low-wage economy. Besides, state policies—also addressed here—must be directed towards the control of the practices of brands and retailers that gave birth to these sweatshop economies. In all cases, renewed practices of union militancy advocating migrant workers' rights and specific campaigns addressing the particular conditions of these workers as migrants, would contribute to the building of a strongly politicised workforce that could join local workers in pushing up labour standards.

Endnotes

[1] Official estimates indicate that informal labour in the garment industry accounts for up to 70% of the sector's labour force (INDEC 2013).
[2] The high level of turnover among these companies (60%) is a sign of this.
[3] All names are pseudonyms.
[4] The UN "Palermo Protocol" (2002) defines trafficking in persons as "the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation."
[5] In Argentina nine sweatshop owners were recently charged with this crime (https://www.fiscales.gob.ar/fiscalias/condenaron-a-una-banda-que-se-dedicaba-a-la-trata-de-personas-para-explotacion-laboral/). In Italy, legislation punishing human trafficking (Law 228/2003) has not yet been used in the few ongoing court cases about abuses in sweatshops.
[6] "Just for a little while" is the name of a documentary by an organisation of migrants in Buenos Aires (Simbiosis Cultural), reflecting the usual idea behind those who migrate for the first time from Bolivia to Argentina.
[7] Ahmad (2008) identifies this pressure for the case of Pakistanis in UK and describes it as if migrant workers were "living off borrowed time".
[8] Pieraccini (2008) and Zanni (2007) highlight the importance of family links as a source of funding, but it is highly unlikely that all investments are funded in this way.
[9] We have no evidence contesting these arguments. Despite several attempts, contact with Chinese entrepreneurs and authorities was not possible.
[10] The owner of one of the sweatshops defended by ACIFEBOL was later caught at the Argentinian border carrying eight people from Bolivia in the back of his own car (a kangoo-style vehicle). He now faces accusations of human smuggling (*Página/12*, December 2010).
[11] See http://www.pagina12.com.ar/diario/sociedad/3-65249-2006-04-06.html
[12] Gustavo Morón, a Bolivian lawyer in Buenos Aires, asserts that "the fact that some Bolivian workers defend their interests in terms of class instead of with reference to the nation is seen by the majority of the organisations as something dangerous. They say that this divides the community" (González 2011).
[13] This has repeatedly motivated criticism to Italian authorities from the UN and the EU Human Rights Commission.
[14] See http://video.ilsole24ore.com/SoleOnLine4/Video/Economia%20e%20Lavoro/2008/v_italia_cina_abc_immigrazione2.php
[15] This information was later confirmed to us by an official from the Consulate.

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