



“Having a name of one’s own, being a part of history”: temporalities of precarity and political subjectivities of popular economy workers in Argentina

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Introduction

On August 7, 2016, a large crowd led by a group of social organizations, including the Confederation of Workers of the Popular Economy (CTEP), embarked on a pilgrimage that, over 13 km, led them to Plaza de Mayo, before the House of Government. The crowd grew in size throughout the 7 h that the demonstration lasted, and eventually came to comprise approximately 100,000 people. The Caravan of Dignity, as it was called by its organizers, was the prelude to the presentation to the National Congress of a draft bill for the “Law of Social Emergency and Organizations of the Popular Economy,” which proposed the creation of a supplementary social wage, a direct transfer of resources to a sector of the population that leads what some authors call “wageless lives” (Denning 2010) and that, according to the CTEP, make up the “popular economy.” Conceived as a trade union, this organization was recently established in Argentina with the aim of representing workers “with neither labor rights nor employer,” who are usually defined as “informal,” “external,” “subsistence,” or “precarious” workers.

In recent years, the notion of precarity has been widely used to characterize the living conditions of a growing share of the population in contemporary capitalism. The literature has contributed to broadening the analytic scope of this category from a notion related to forms of employment to one that encompasses broader living conditions (Das and Randeria 2015; Millar 2014; Neilson and Rossiter 2008), and has highlighted its potential as a political and analytical category (Barchiesi 2012). In particular, recent anthropological studies have shown how the experience of precarity,

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on the one hand, acts as the foundation for the development of individual and collective strategies to “make a living,” strategies which aim to improve the material and emotional well-being of present and future generations, and through which individuals strive to build lives that are worth living (Narotzky and Besnier 2014). On the other hand, scholars have also shown how experiences of precarity give rise to languages and projects of political organization (Das and Randeria 2015; Ferguson 2015).

This approach proposes an alternative point of view to that which has prevailed in the social sciences, where the category of precarity has been used to make reference mainly to the conditions of flexible employment that have become increasingly widespread against the backdrop of neoliberal capitalism. Instead, anthropological studies have put forward the idea of precarity as an analytical category that allows one to articulately conceptualize an experience related to working conditions (which include flexible ways of employment, as well as other arrangements traditionally defined as “informal”) and how those conditions interact with living conditions. Focusing on precarity as an experience enables a reading that considers how precarity is processed individually and collectively, including affects, desires, and forms of socializing (Millar 2014).

In the case of the CTEP, the experience of precarity has given rise to a collective process of political construction that links a living past, anchored in a subjective experience, with a future that embodies this experience in political terms in the form of a union. This article draws on the collaborative research I have been carrying out since the end of 2015, with cooperatives and associations of street vendors who work in public transport, shows, and sport venues, as well as with vendors in street markets, who are part of the confederation. In the first section, I present the conceptualization of “popular economy” developed by the CTEP as a political claim category that collectively encompasses heterogeneous work experiences and life trajectories. Afterwards, I discuss how, in the case of the people who work in public spaces about whom I have developed my research, this process of construction of demands for rights gave rise to a theory of public spaces as spaces for income generation. My goal is to show how this conceptualization is mediated by the way in which the State defines the vendors’ activity as illegal, against which the vendors stress the “public service” nature of their work, highlighting their activity’s value-creation process. Finally, I focus specifically on the case of the Cooperative of United Vendors of the San Martín Train (Cooperativa de Vendedores Unidos del Tren San Martín), which comprises street vendors who sell consumer goods to train passengers. I analyze the centrality of the links between corporality, kinship, and their materiality in the case of those who work as train vendors, for whom precarity is an experience encompassing several generations. Addressing the central nature of those links, I discuss how this experience of precarity over time is the foundation for the production of political subjectivities, through what we may call “bodily precarity.”

Various authors have highlighted that, far from representing an exception, the experience of precarity has been the rule in the development of capitalism characterizing the living conditions of the vast majority of the inhabitants of the so-called Global South (Munck 2013; Ferguson 2015). In particular, some authors have stressed that for large shares of the population defined as “poor,” the experience of precarity has been far from constituting a discontinuity with a stable and protected past; rather, it has been a structural condition which models their “form of life,” including the expectation and vision or projects for the future (de L’Estoile 2014). In a recent work, Sharryn Kasmir (2018) makes a distinction between an ontological approach to precarity as human condition focusing on emotions and subjectivity (whose ahistorical nature has drawn criticism) and a perspective which posits precarity as a

phenomenon inherent to neoliberal capitalism, which has been challenged on the grounds of its ethnocentric nature. Articulating both approaches, the author argues that precarity as an analytical category has the potential of pointing out the continuous process of differentiation of the working class through time and space beyond a wage-centered perspective, which challenges the old north/south dichotomy, insofar as it assumes that there is a process of convergence of workers' lives at a global level. Taking that statement as a starting point, my analysis seeks to contribute to the discussion regarding the notion of precarity by focusing on experience to address both the need of situating its analysis historically and socially, and to the centrality of desires, affects, emotions, etc. I argue that focusing on the way in which bodily precarity enables creative processes of union organization by challenging a destiny of disorganization, it is possible to help understand the nuances that the experience of precarity takes on in specific contexts, in light of broader historical processes.

The popular economy as a political claim category

The CTEP was created in 2011 through the confluence of a heterogeneous set of social and political organizations, some of which have a long trajectory dating back at least to the 1990s, at the height of the so-called neoliberal policies in Argentina. One of the most numerous is the Evita Movement, a national political organization with parliamentary representation. The "Evita," as it is called colloquially, was created in 2005 from the Movement of Unemployed Workers (MTD), a grassroots organization from the southern part of Greater Buenos Aires, whose members were organized and mobilized around the identification of being "unemployed." In fact, the starting point for my field work, which began in mid-2015, was my relationship with Gabriela, a leader of a street vendors' cooperative that is part of the Evita Movement's Trade Union, and which joined the CTEP as activists of this political-union space.

The CTEP defines itself as a trade union, the workers' union of the "popular economy," meaning those who, having been left out of the labor market, "invented a job to survive." In order to achieve this objective, it has demanded that the State recognizes them as a workers' union, an aim which they partially achieved hours before to the end of the Cristina Kirchner administration, when the Ministry of Labor legally recognized them, on December 9, 2015. The formal recognition of this organization implied the creation of a new social entity that grants recognition of the right to collective negotiation and representation to a sector of workers that, until then, were not recognized as such, even though it is not defined as a union or a legal entity like other trade union organizations in Argentina.

As mentioned earlier, the CTEP defines the popular economy as a sector of the working class "with neither labor rights nor employer." As such, it implies practices of self-organization or self-management of labor which, far from defining "another economy," are expressions of a global market economy with which it has multiple touch points (Persico and Grabois 2015). This implies a differentiated positioning within a field that is shared with other grassroots organizations, and which acts as a hub for cooperatives and associations, where the idea of social economy or self-management becomes central. This positioning must be understood within a context where the social economy and cooperative work have developed in particular ways in Argentina between 2003 and 2015: namely, they have become one of the State's main avenues for job creation and "social inclusion" among this population (Hintze 2007; Grassi 2012). From this point of view, the "popular economy" is conceptualized as an expression of the way in which "the proletariat multiplies" to guarantee the reproduction process of capital

accumulation “by making, unmaking and remaking the working class” (Carbonella and Kasmir 2015: 42).

This conceptualization of the “popular economy” includes a very wide diversity of socioeconomic activities and organizational formats. It includes, for example, cooperatives created through State programs which perform tasks of maintenance of urban public infrastructure (squares, streets, and sidewalks), self-construction and maintenance of housing, and, to a lesser extent, food or clothing production activities. Other cooperatives, instead, stem from initially self-managed processes, such as those of worker-controlled companies, organizations of waste pickers, subcontracted textile workers, and those who define themselves as “buscas,” a category of self-ascription that defines anyone who finds a way to “make a living.” This diversity of activities and practices involves the heterogeneous life trajectories of people for whom waged work constitutes a recent past experience, who coexist with those for whom it has never been a viable way of making a living. Then, different temporalities of precarity coexist and could be framed as both: as a recent experience and one that extends over time and generations.

Thus, “popular economy” becomes a category of claim-making that seeks to unify this heterogeneous population highlighting two attributes that shape the way in which they make demands and practice politics: (a) the recognition of this population as workers; (b) the absence of guarantees of rights that characterize employment which is “formal” or “full-time, for a company”: health insurance, pension contributions, sick-leave, workplace accident insurance, family allowances, etc., which in Argentina laid the foundations of “social citizenship” (James 1990). Hence, the CTEP’s cross-cutting objective is to equate the rights of this sector with those of the rest of the working class, and its main statement is synthesized in the phrase “We are what is missing.” The creation of the “Senderos” health mutual organization must be considered against this backdrop: it was aimed at providing the group with a healthcare organization of its own,¹ which represents one of the main components of the CTEP’s political construction process as a union.

From this perspective, the demand for a “Social Emergency, Food, and Popular Economy Organizations Law” is a milestone. The law passed in December 2016, and its implementation began the following year. Among its proposals, the law considers the creation of a supplementary social wage, a “State allowance” for “informal” workers or those whose income is below the minimum wage (the equivalent is 298 USD.) This direct cash transfer is considered as a “supplement” to the income derived from their activity,² and it is defined as a “wage” hence, emphasizing the worker status of those who are part of the popular economy.

This initiative and, in a broader sense, the process of constructing rights for workers in the popular economy being carried out by the CTEP can be analyzed in a dialog with James Ferguson’s analysis of South Africa. That is, as a dispute for the “rightful share” (Ferguson 2015: 168) of these populations in the distribution of wealth. Following Ferguson, this process of demand is sustained in the recognition that these populations—black and poor in the case of South Africa—are rightful owners of a vast national wealth which is produced collectively and from which they have been deprived through historical processes of dispossession. As I have

¹ Currently, the organization has 42,063 members, as well as its own healthcare centers throughout the country, which provide comprehensive healthcare services, which include agreements with other more specialized centers.

² The final text can be found on: <http://www.senado.gov.ar/parlamentario/comisiones/verExp/3612.16/S/PL>. With the aim of applying this measure, the law includes the creation of a registry of popular economy workers. As of now (October 2018), a total of 260,000 social wages was implemented out of the 1,000,000 established by the law.

previously argued (Fernández Álvarez 2018), in the case of Argentina, this processes must be understood taking into account the social, economic, and political transformations which took place in the country over the last three decades and their impact on the composition of the working class. Specifically, against the backdrop of an employers' offensive involving an economic, social, and political restructuring which began in the mid-1970s and became more acute in the 1990s.³ As it has been pointed out by the local literature (Villareal 1985; Basualdo 2012; Schorr 2004), the military dictatorship of 1976–1983 produced a drastic modification of the Argentine social structure that cannot be explained in strictly economic terms; rather, it is necessary to weigh its effects on the working classes due through direct repression to trade unions and political organizations at a community level, and a deindustrialization process that involved closing more than 20 thousand factories. This resulted in a transfer of resources to other sectors of the economy, mainly the financial sector (Basualdo 2001), with the consequent deterioration of the income levels and living conditions of the working class. As a whole, these studies highlight how the systematic use of terror sought to silence the practices of confrontation and political activism and, in a broader sense, to discipline the working class which during the previous decades had managed to achieve a consolidated degree of power through the trade union organizations historically linked to Peronism.

The concept of a "rightful share" is both productive and lacking as a means to understand the process of "political claim-making" by the CETP. It is productive inasmuch as it posits an interesting perspective from which to consider social transfers beyond the traditional gift/market duality, giving a prominent role to a principle of legitimacy based on belonging, as allocations properly due to rightful owners (Ferguson 2015: 178). Indeed, in the case of the CTEP, the dispute over the forms of redistribution of wealth is based on an idea of participation whose principle of legitimacy is based on the fact that those who are part of the popular economy are those who were forced to "invent a job to survive" as a consequence of a growing process of dispossession, borrowing the formula proposed by David Harvey (2003), that has left them outside of the possibilities of waged employment. In this sense, it is a process of construction of rights that includes, surpasses, and stresses the idea of exclusion, noting that it is a population that has been systematically dispossessed of goods, resources, and rights. However, at the same time, it is lacking insofar as the CTEP's conceptualization of the popular economy as a claim-making category highlights the productive—albeit subordinate—nature of this sector of the population in the generation of wealth, of which they are deprived through indirect exploitation mechanisms, as evidenced in the definition of supplementary wage as opposed to a mere transfer. Thus, rather than be excluded, the workers of the popular economy become creditors in a situation of historical debt that is owed to them. As we shall see below, the public space is the resource around which historical dispossession revolves, and is now the ground for demands and claims.

³ The most dramatic consequences of this restructuring have been the deterioration of employment and income levels, and a significant deepening of social inequalities, as well as rising poverty levels (Beccaria and López 1996; Rofman 1997; Minujin 1997). The unemployment rate was 2.6% at the beginning of the 1980s, 7.5% 10 years later, 17.5% in 1995, and it peaked at 21.5% in 2002. Poverty levels show similar increases, rising from 29.8% in the 1980s to 57.8% in 2002 (INDEC-EPH 2002). While these indicators decreased meaningfully during the Kirchner governments (2003–2015), a significant percentage of the working class, far from being reabsorbed as part of the labor market through waged work, either swelled the ranks of the sector of the economy defined as "informal," or went into outsourcing circuits accessing precarious jobs. To illustrate, it is worth mentioning that by the beginning of this decade, one in three waged workers was unregistered (Basualdo 2012).

The public space as a resource in dispute

Following the rationale of the trade union organizations in Argentina, the CTEP is organized in several branches of activity with the purpose of unifying problems, objectives, and interests common to each occupational sector.⁴ Thus, street vendors, street-market vendors, people who watch over parked cars, etc., comprise the “branch of public space workers.” My current research with workers in public spaces shows that this process of constructing collective demands brings to the foreground the right to the use of public space as a space for work and (re)production of life. This perspective opposes the principles governing its use in the terms defined by the State, according to which these activities are defined as “illegal.” This is particularly relevant in the metropolitan area of Buenos Aires, where we are witnessing an accelerated process of transformation of urban centers, which mainly affects street vendors (who constitute the majority of workers in the branch). This process is based on a policy of ordering public space that particularly affects its use as a support for work practices considered “informal” or even “illegal.” The policy is summarized in an idea of “cleanliness” (Pacecca et al. 2017), and has included in recent years strategies of direct repression of street vending, combined with efforts to privatize public space, for instance, through the creation of “gastronomy and entertainment areas”⁵ financed by the local government and linked to gentrification. In Buenos Aires, since the 1990s, the transformation of urban centers began in historical areas and included a growing displacement of popular neighborhoods in parallel with the concentration and expansion of the real estate market (Carman 2006; Girola 2006). This process has counterparts in other large metropolises, both in the Global South and the Global North, where growing processes of urban segregation and public space privatization have taken place (Caldeira 2001; Wacquant 2007; Susser 2012).

It is worth briefly mentioning the events of last January in the neighborhood of “Once,” in the city of Buenos Aires. This is a working-class neighborhood located near the station of the metropolitan train that connects the city with the western part of the Greater Buenos Aires area. It constitutes one of the most active shopping districts of the city, and it had the greatest concentration of street vendors with fixed stalls at the time of my field work.⁶ On January 10, 2017—a time when the pace and activities of the city are slowed down due to summer holidays—the government of the City of Buenos Aires launched a repressive operation with the aim of expelling street vendors. During the night, hundreds of police officers accompanied officials from the Ministry of the Environment and Public Space to destroy vendors’ stalls installed on the sidewalks. The following morning, the streets were occupied not by vendors, but by law enforcement agencies. Some vendors were arrested, and some merchandise was seized.

State regulation has not always been entirely repressive, though. In 2011, the Buenos Aires legislature sanctioned Law 4121 regulating the use of the public space, by which street vending was prohibited except in the case of the sale of handicrafts. Before that date, this activity was allowed in the city of Buenos Aires when practiced “for mere subsistence.” The

⁴ See Muñoz and Villar (2017) for a detailed analysis of the main demands of the various branches.

⁵ These “gastronomy areas” have the explicit objective of “boosting businesses,” and they have been granted an investment of 12 million pesos—approx. 810,000 USD—funded by the government of the city of Buenos Aires. See <http://bapc.buenosaires.gov.ar/2016/06/24/decks-gastronomic>.

⁶ According to the *Cámara Argentina de la Empresa* (Argentine Chamber of Companies), there were close to 2000 fixed stalls <http://www.cele-ve.com.ar/Segun-la-CAME-la-venta-ilegal-en-Once-movilizo-3-700-millones-en-2016.html>

field of contravention is characterized as a management of "tolerated illegalities" in the terms given by Michel Foucault (1975) to this idea (Pita 2012): that is, as prohibited activities that are tolerated up to a certain limit. This management of illegalities includes various forms of penalty (fines, confiscation of goods, and, in some cases, arrests) giving rise to a discretionary administration by government agents ("arrangements" reached with law enforcement authorities or their intermediaries, which entail the payment of a fixed amount) which coexists with growing and focused practices of expulsion and direct repression.

The associations or cooperatives of the CTEP have been created in opposition to this management of illegalities and, in a broader sense, to the policy of ordering public space. The idea of conflict is actually a central category in the organizational dynamics of the branch. It is a language that organizes this space and which is used to refer both to a specific event located in different neighborhoods of Buenos Aires (e.g., the conflict of Flores, the conflict of Caballito, and the conflict of Once) and, in a broader sense, to the relational dynamics between workers and law enforcement authorities "on the street."

So, for example, on my first visit to the CTEP, I met Héctor, a "lifelong *busca*" that from the age of 14 sold food products (candy, drinks, and hamburgers) on busses, on the street, and in stadiums. As many of his colleagues, he migrated from the north of Argentina to Buenos Aires in search of a better life, and found a way of making a living in the streets. Almost without knowing me, Héctor began to tell me about the conflict they had with the police at the time. He explained that they "did not recognize them as workers" and that, like himself, "100 families were about to be thrown onto the streets" (an expression that, in that context, paradoxically meant "without a street to work at"). He explained that the "conflict" had been triggered by their refusal to "keep paying to work"—referring to the bribes they must pay police officers to be allowed to carry out their activity—as a result of which they had decided to organize themselves and create a cooperative "to fight for their rights." As I could quickly verify, organizations often originate in such acts of resistance.

This idea of conflict is crucial because, for the workers and activists that take part in the CTEP, public space is defined as a resource in dispute. In short, the public space "of the cities" constitutes, in their own words, "the last link in the chain of production, a resource that has an economic value in the same way that water or land do."⁷ Here, there is a significance in the appeals, made both in internal documents and public interventions, to the idea of a "right to the city" as the axis that articulates and supports this demand process, which is strongly influenced by the ideas of David Harvey (2012) which have circulated in spaces of militancy and activism of popular sectors and have had great influence in the last decades in Latin America.⁸ In effect, this conceptualization adopts the argumentative axis proposed by the Marxist theorist regarding urban space as a privileged area of accumulation of capital based on the processes of globalization and the neoliberal policies, whose counterpart is found in the growing processes of dispossession of the urban masses from the right to the city and the growing inequality in the distribution of wealth that this process entails. Not less significant is the author's approach to the potentiality that the urban space gains as a basis for the development of processes of struggle for the appropriation of the surplus value generated in the cities.

⁷ From the document prepared for the *Primer Encuentro Nacional de la Rama de Trabajadores de los Espacios Públicos* (First National Meeting of Branch of Workers of Public Spaces) in October 2015.

⁸ In relation to this point, we must take into account the connection that the CTEP militants have established with leaders, technicians, and academics in spaces of transnational activism who work on offshoring these processes, showing their insertion in dynamics of transformation of capitalism on a global level.

This notion of public space as a space of dispute takes on its full meanings in association with how workers define their activity as a “public service.” Specifically, because the activity they carry out consists of “productospopulares a preciospopulares” (selling products for the working class at working-class prices), thus guaranteeing access to the mass consumption of goods to which this population would not have access by other means. However, in a broader sense, it is a public service because it gives rise to practices and ways of looking after neighbors, passengers, pedestrians, or “the neighborhood” as a whole, for example by making areas of the city safe, providing train passengers with a drink or something to eat when they return home after a day’s work, marketing products which are too close to their expiration date to be sold in the shops, thus minimizing the quantity of food that ends in landfills, or even in some cases generating a market for local products that have no possibility of being marketed in the mass-marketing circuits.

Thus, the political work carried out by the CTEP militants can be thought of as a struggle for the recognition of the rightful share of “urban commons” (streets, squares, etc.) and of the work carried out by street vendors, people who look after parked cars, etcetera, as an activity that gives effect to the rightful share in the distribution of that common. In their daily lives, workers have a share in the collective wealth that is produced in the city. At the same time, in its everyday activism, the CTEP collectively produces and disputes the rightful entitlement to such a share.

Thus, in their daily struggle for the recognition of their activity as work and, with it, of the right to use public space as a space for the reproduction of life, workers and CTEP activists developed, at the same time, a conceptualization of public space as a resource and as a venue for income generation. This entails a theory of value production that calls into question an old discussion about what we call “(in)formal” or “(il)legal.” It supports the political work that the CTEP—or, more precisely, its activists and leaders—carries out and underlines the right of “workers of the popular economy” to participate in the income that the city produces, to collectively claim ownership of a small part of that income. The value theory that the CTEP members are working on shows the extent to which the idea of urban policy that the Buenos Aires city government promotes hides the social relations produced by that space, including the relations of production. It reveals a process of reification of the public space that seeks to reduce it to a purely “physical” dimension, as a “neutral” space that prioritizes its logistics function (a space for pedestrians and recreation), making invisible and leaving out the social relations that produce it. This is a theory that we can describe as a “(un)fetishizing of public space” which, by restoring its relational dimension, illuminates the relations of appropriation-expropriation of production of inequalities and asymmetries that the idea of urban policy hides.

The experience of precarity as a basis for the production of political subjectivities

Unlike other groups, such as waste pickers or the workers of worker-controlled companies, for whom precarity is a recent experience, the salespeople included in the Cooperative of United Vendors of the San Martín Train show a different trajectory. The San Martín Train is an intercity line which connects the center of the city of Buenos Aires with the suburbs in the northwest. This organization was formally constituted in August 2014, and in 2017 acquired the status of a social entity as a cooperative. However, well before 2014, the train vendors already had a highly structured organization, with its codes and rules to organize not only the

space but also the pace, dynamics, and working relationships. These “codes of life”—to use their terms—have, over the years, been more or less explicit rules, always practiced collectively. Since the creation of the association, they took the form of a written regulation, reinforcing their existence and scope.

Now, the creation of these “codes of life” is supported by and built on kinship relations that take center stage in this social universe. These ties organize key aspects, from the very possibility of working to the way of using space and practicing the activity, and even the circulation of know-how related to the sale itself (learning at what time it is best to go out to sell, where to buy and store goods, how to interact with guards and law enforcement agents, etc.) In fact, in order to join (*entrar*⁹) the group of train vendors, one must be the son or daughter of a vendor. Being a train vendor is in fact an activity that is “inherited”—it also includes the product that can be sold—to the point that a vendor often conveys the peace of mind of knowing that his or her children will at least have this option available to “make a living,” borrowing the formula proposed by Narotzky and Besnier (2014).

In this way, vendors that I did not know were frequently introduced to me as “the son of,” “the brother of,” or “the grandson of” some other vendor. At meetings, this chain of affiliations was often pointed out to me, revealing the generations encompassed. Looking at the nicknames used among street vendors illustrates this point well: a chain of diminutives is followed, where nicknames derive from the nickname given to the father or older sibling. Nicknames usually come from the products they started with as “*buscas*.” Thus, “Lima” (nail file) is used for a salesperson selling nail files, and “*Limita*” (little nail file) for his/her younger sibling.

In addition to this centrality of kinship, we should note the way in which the idea of family is used to refer to the relationships that are woven between the vendors of the San Martín train. “We are a family,” they often emphasize when talking about their association. This statement has the intention of pointing out both the kinship and the “codes of life” that were created to deal with situations of systematic violence applied by law enforcement agents and government authorities by developing collective care practices which include the association itself. Thus, having a flag of its own, wearing a T-shirt with the cooperative logo, and belonging to the CTEP constitute, on the one hand, a way for people to protect themselves against potential situations of violence. On the other hand, they form a cleavage from which to elaborate specific demands to be recognized as workers that offer a “service” to the passenger in some way linked to the railway company that operates the service. It is therefore clear that the notion of family includes and transcends “biological” bonds to include relations of friendship and cohabitation forged in the train, which become intelligible in the light of the idea of mutuality of being in the terms proposed by M. Sahlin (2011), as it has been analyzed by Sian Lazar (2017, 2018) for state labor unions in Argentina (see also Wolanski 2015).

The universe of the train—unlike that of street vending—is a male universe, even though, paradoxically, the most prominent member of the group is a woman: Silvia, who is currently 38 years old, started working on the train at age 7, and has been active in the Evita Movement for over 10 years, since the days in which this organization still defined itself as movement “of the unemployed.” Silvia’s life trajectory is a common characteristic that is repeated in the trajectories of most of the “older” vendors. It is worth mentioning that the distinction between “young” or “new” vs. “old” vendors defines an extremely significant classification within the universe of train vendors—as pointed out in other studies (Perelman 2017)—constituting one

⁹ The Spanish verb “*entrar*” refers both to the act of joining a group and to the action of entering a, for instance, a train car.

of the main sources of tension among them and one of the main concerns for those who drive the organization. This classification, as well as that of gender, establishes extremely complex forms of inequality, which erase an idea of family as synonymous with harmonic relations. In the meetings I attended and in my informal conversations, references to the “young people” who “did not respect the codes” and the conflicts that this generated with the passengers and the railway company were a recurring topic.

Particularly, in the interactions I had during my field work with the “older” or “lifelong” vendors, it has been common for them to reconstruct their life trajectories as experiences marked by a childhood of poverty that forced them to work from very early ages. However, far from stories characterized by a “pathetic” or “miserable” narrative, references to childhood combine moments of suffering for situations of need in their families with a narrative in which trains are described as a space of freedom and play. The way in which they described accidents on the train was particularly shocking. Some left body marks or killed a “compañero” (colleague). These narrations formed part of stories such as those in which they described boys enjoying jumping from one train to another, making bets on whether they could get on the train when it was already in motion, or daring each other to be the last on the train after it had already started. These narratives are an invitation to think about train, or “the track” (the “fierro”)—to use the terms that my interlocutors favored when talking about the train—as a substance of kinship, borrowing the term from Janet Carlsen (2014), as a relational space that forges, creates, and (re)defines kinship ties. Kinship provides an imaginative realm to think not only of who we are but also of who we can be in the future (Carlsen 2014: 113). The *fierro* as a matter projected on the mutilated bodies and defining a link of continuity embodied in the production of family relationships which is present in the deaths of those who have gone, but also renews practices of collective care and organization. This is a bond that I have witnessed under more “adult” but no less playful situations, when I joined the vendors on their route: jumping from the platform while the train is passing or crossing the tracks even though the train is arriving.

This experience of precarity, which spans generations, is forged on the tracks and is carried “in the blood,” as Silvia’s elder daughter—who works selling candy in the train like her mother—said one afternoon, also includes a personal and collective history of long-standing dispute to continue being *buscas*. In effect, these reconstructions of life trajectories marked by precarious living conditions also include recurrent references to situations of systematic violence that they had to face as children or young adults in order to work. In these cases, they often emphasize the persecution and arrests during the 1980s when the security forces “fabricated” cases in order to deprive them of their freedom for several days, in some cases for weeks and months, and which occurred systematically and on an ongoing basis. In the case of workers who are today between 60 and 70 years old, their stories also include mentions of comrades who disappeared during the military dictatorship of 1976–1983. The 1990s and the process of privatization of the railways is also a period of life that is often reported as a particularly difficult time for the *buscas*. Several even pointed out that it was during the privatization that it became necessary to resist with greater force in order to be able to continue working and “not to disappear off the train.” These accounts explain that the persecution of the *buscas* was due to the harassment from security personnel hired by the new railway companies. This experience of precarity is projected in the everyday life of the vendors, whose working conditions and living conditions in a broad sense have undergone a significant deterioration as a result of the implementation, since 2015, of a drastic policy of adjustment by the government of Mauricio Macri. This policy translated into dramatic increases in utility

fees and a sizeable acceleration of inflation, which impacts the cost of food, medicine, and other basic input for the reproduction of life. This is coupled by the sharp decrease in the capability for consumption of the working classes (with a direct impact on sales) and the exacerbation of strategies for the direct repression on street vending, which I mentioned above.

These are, in short, experiences and life trajectories in which it is possible to reconstruct a temporal depth that goes back at least two or three generations. In this sense, it is possible to think of a socialization in this activity that begins at very early ages, with children accompanying parents, older siblings, or other relatives. It is therefore often the case that the same person who acknowledges a deep uncertainty with regard to the future linked to his work expresses at the same time the love for what he does or the freedom he feels when working without a boss, managing his schedule, and his income, attributes which are embodied in their own trajectories and those of their elders. This is a production of subjectivities forged in that history, which is their own and that of their parents, grandparents, etcetera, in which "the tracks," and that space as substance (both material and relationship-linked), produce them as a "part of them."

This recognition of genealogies as part of "the tracks," of an activity and a way of life that is transmitted from parents to children and is part of the expectations for future life, of how they look at and project themselves in those who follow, has been recurrent in the conversations that I had in these years with the train vendors. That is how "Narigón," Silvia's partner, who, like her, joined the train vendors at a young age, described it while we were in the living room of their house, pointing to their youngest child who was there, and explaining that he hoped for his son to 1 day follow in his footsteps as a vendor as his two elder siblings have done several years ago. A future projection that also extends into the past, to the parents who opened the way so that today they can continue to be on the train as workers. In the assemblies that I attended, activists advocated for collaborative work among recently formed associations on the different railway lines to achieve recognition as "lifelong vendors" by the railway company. At the first "Inter-railway Assembly," which took place in June 2017, the representatives, wrapped in great emotion, celebrated the "historical event" of having managed to bring together the vendors of all the lines, pointing out the importance of that meeting as a possibility for better working and living conditions for the future generations. In the first meeting, a worker and referent from another line, held up his cellphone, projecting the assembly to his father who followed it from Necochea, a seaside city, where he had settled after working all his life on the train. In his closing speech, through tears he gave greetings on behalf of his father, emphasizing the importance of fighting for recognition as train workers and organizing as a union to fight for their rights, and reminisced of the nights waiting for his father, who had been arrested for selling on the train, stating "we don't want this for our children."

In short, this process of organization can be read as an interplay between structural constraints, life experiences, and future expectations (Narotzky and Besnier 2014; deL'Estoile 2014). In these terms, street vending has been a way of making a living that, far from constituting a discontinuity with a stable and protected past, has been a structural condition for the production of "lives that are worth living for themselves and for future generations," which currently includes the creation of union organization spaces aiming to the production of forms of recognition, protection, and collective rights as workers. To put it in the terms used by my interlocutors: "We want to work as we have worked all our lives," in such a way that the very possibility of remaining vendors, to continue being, constitutes the starting point of this process of production of political subjectivities and collective organization in a context where this activity has increasingly become the object of repressive strategies. This implies a process

of struggle for the right to work that brings with it a dispute over the use of public space, on the basis of which the CTEP activists have developed a theory of it as income production. They carry out a process of collective production of (partial) commons that integrate long-term life forms without denying them, without seeking to erase them in a process of collective production that recognizes and legitimizes them, projecting into the future forms of well-being and rights that integrate them. A projection in which to maintain their “codes of life,” establishing rules in a job where freedom is a highly valued attribute (freedom in schedules, relationships, and ways of doing, but above all in relation to control over income), is a necessary step to guarantee that very freedom.

In a recent piece about metal workers in India, Andrew Sanchez (2018) analyzes the way in which the subjective political experience of precarity acquires specific forms based on the history and expectations of people with regard to what it means to have a good life and how to achieve it. In discussion with the conceptualization of precarity as a class developed by Guy Standing (2011), he points out the importance of “grasp(ing) class (as) a dynamic historical object that intersects with experiences of struggle, decline, hope, and fatalism” (Sanchez 2018: 222). In the same direction, my work sought to show how the experience of precarity entails a process of political subjectivity that is anchored in long-standing ways of making a living that shape future expectations, the ways in which they project themselves into the future, and the terms under which they dispute collective rights. Consequently, more than being concerned with understanding to what extent precarity constitutes a class or generates specific forms of political subjectivity, my reflection aims to focus on the experience in a situated manner, remembering the terms in which the historian E. P. Thompson (1965) proposed understanding this category. That is, as a fertile category which can account for the way in which people behave, how they live, interpret, and signify their material conditions of life in a process of assignment of meaning that includes ideas, emotions, feelings, values, and traditions. Therefore, it is a process that is historically and socially situated. It is in these terms that it is productive to carry out an analysis of bodily precarity which allows us to understand the ways in which that experience is embodied, enabling a process of political subjectivity that, in the case at hand, currently includes the creation of union organization spaces aimed at producing forms of recognition, protection, and collective rights as workers.

Bodily precarity

The trajectories of the vast majority of those who are members of Cooperative of United Vendors of the San Martín Train are marked by an experience of precarity that continues through generations. In contrast, a significant component among those who form the CTEP is represented by trajectories where precarity is a relatively recent experience. This experience is embodied in the lives of female workers and activists, such as Gabriela, who, when speaking in public or in meeting with other workers, usually emphasizes that, as many of her colleagues, she belongs to a generation that, unlike their parents’ or grandparents’, did not know salaried work, that “was left out of the system generationally.” This refers to precarious life experiences, in contrast to a past in which her parents and grandparents had access to rights granted by the formal employment they could access. To her, being left out of the system means being displaced from the formal labor market, but inserted in the dynamics of exploitation, more vulnerable living conditions, and a lack of rights.

The CTEP takes shape, does politics, and creates spaces of dispute from and for the “popular economy” within this dynamics that questions the idea of exclusion by marking the experience of precarity as both a recent experience and one that is prolonged over time; as a life experience that surpasses but includes working conditions. This experience of precarity intertwines a living past with a future that projects this experience in political terms in the form of a workers’ union. As I attempted to show here, it is a process of collective construction in which wage labor acts as a horizon from which subjectivities are projected less as something to be transformed (from being workers in the popular economy to becoming waged workers) and more as a basis for the production and struggle for collective rights. In other words, if the creation of a demand for rights for the workers of the “popular economy” adopts an idea of waged labor which laid the foundations of social citizenship in Argentina, at the same time it defies this construction by asserting its exceptional character. From this point of view, the CTEP initiates a process of political experimentation that, in keeping with a principle of multiplicity of the working class in the sense indicated by Carbonella and Kasmir (2015) rests on the necessarily heterogeneous character of the popular economy, accepting the challenge of acting within the diversity that lies within it, while also declaring the urgency of trade union representation.

In this sense, I argued that the conceptualization coined by the CTEP of the popular economy as a claim-making category challenges the formats and conceptions available from which the forms of organization of the working class(es) are usually discussed, from a teleological standpoint with a given aim. This standpoint represents a bet towards turning heterogeneity into a means for the construction of a shared horizon of struggle, a common experience from which political subjectivities are configured as a part of that experience in the making.

Taking the notion of “experience” as a starting point, this work is a contribution to recent anthropological debates on the concept of “class” and the ways in which it is organized by weaving the multiplicities of work (Kasmir and Carbonella 2008; Carrier and Kalb 2015; Mollona 2009; Collins 2012; Lazar 2017). Indeed, if the notion of class had been relegated from ethnographical analysis, in the last few years it has reemerged, as a category less positional than political, related to the various historically situated forms in which struggle and antagonism processes take place (Smith 2015; Kalb 2015). To think of class in political terms implies moving from an idea of a subject of being to an understanding of subjectivity as inherently a process of becoming (Smith 2015: 73). This is clearly a perspective which takes us back to the conceptualization by E. P. Thompson, who, resorting to the concept of “experience,” put forward the concept of class as a process and as a relation.

As pointed out by Kathleen Millar (2015), this perspective entails an interesting starting point to discuss the process-history-temporality relation, insofar as history is the product of individual and collective projects, elaborated in its *formation*. Indeed, for the British historian, the idea of process is a category linked to that of history as text. The contingent and creative nature of social life is not determined by history as an external factor: rather, it produces history. When prioritizing the vivid component of experience—as a way of processing which includes meanings, feelings, values, emotions, and affections, and operating analytically as a mediating category between conditionality and agency—the idea of a process includes in the Thompsonian perspective the fluid and also immanent nature of social life: experience is a way of producing the world and of being in the world.

The temporality contained in the precarity trajectories I discussed in this work account for the ways in which people experience their living conditions, and can only be understood under

the light of customs, traditions, and intergenerational heritages, in a past-present which is linked to that experience. It is in that sense that I address what has been defined here as “bodily precarity,” a category integrating contributions from a perspective both ontological and historical of precarity. This idea sheds light on the way in which the experience of precarity shapes bodies, emotions, feelings, and affections which give rise to long-standing relations of violence and inequality, which can at the same time be the foundation for the development of creative process of experimentation and construction of political subjectivities, based on the defense of ways of life which are at risk.

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Compliance with ethical standards

Conflict of interest The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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