



Forum response to “Building from heterogeneity: the decomposition and recomposition of the working class viewed from the ‘popular economy’ in Argentina”

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Published online: 22 April 2019
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The current proletarian landscape in Argentina cannot be understood without tracing a genealogy in which the emergence of the *piquetero* movement at the beginning of this century stands out as a crucial moment of “insubordination.” Widely acknowledged in social movements themselves, the eruption of the *piqueteros* changed the terms of debate about work and dignity as necessarily tied to the wage, and also the nature of territorial location of worker political organization (see in particular Colectivo Situaciones and MTD de Solano, 2002). Such changes reflect the complex character of the so-called popular economy that prevails today in Argentina. The “popular economy” which incorporates forms work linked to self-management, work without a boss, and the invention of labor forms outside of the wage, a heterogeneous proletariat with diverse means of making a living has become a stabilize feature of the Argentine socio-economy. The emergence of such practices must be seen in historical terms as not being possible without the *prior* destabilization initiated by the social and popular antagonistic forces that fueled and sustained the crisis initiated in 2001.

Popular economies must of course be situated within an historical context of deindustrialization and neoliberal reforms, but also I suggest *popular economies have a political genealogy*.

Therefore, the analysis of popular economies requires an understanding of what I have called “neoliberalism from below” (Gago 2017), in which “neoliberal reason” (a supposed norm of purely mercantile calculation) is appropriated, ruined, transformed, and relaunched by those who are supposed to be only its victims. The reckoning with the dynamics of “neoliberalism from below” reflects an acknowledgment of how neoliberalism’s logic has been pluralized, and of the need to recognize popular attempts to resist and reformulate this logic.

This characterization of popular economies presents us with another problem, which Fernández Alvarez addresses in her text: the form of exploitation of the heterogeneity of the labor force and the “production of difference” as a key point in the dispute of the frontiers of

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capitalist valorization. Therefore, it is necessary to think about the concrete forms and determinations of that growing heterogeneity of class composition, particularly in relation to Latin America. To understand that heterogeneity from the point of view of the “making of” class, I use the term “baroque” together with the adjective “mottled” (*abigarrado*) in conversation with three Latin American thinkers: Bolívar Echeverría, René Zavaleta Mercado, and Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui. Echeverría’s (1998) “baroque” refers to the arts of resistance in colonial societies, as constitutive moments of Latin American modernity. The term “mottled” in Zavaleta Mercado (1990) names the superimposition of territories, logics, and temporalities that is also constitutive of Latin American societies, in which forms of life and political organization coexist that do not respond solely to the principle of national state sovereignty. Rivera Cusicanqui (2010) also works with that concept of the mottled in a radical way to produce an epistemology as a decolonizing practice.

The CTEP—the primary object of reflection in Fernández Alvarez’s article—is an experiment in creating a union tool that works in relation to that heterogeneous reality. Due to that very diversity, its capacity for representation always reflects the tension between a search for “unity” (inherent to the representative logic) and the structural impossibility of finding it through the classic tool of the wage. If the wage managed to create a status of unity of what was recognized as work within the Fordist paradigm, today, that function cannot be simply replaced by calling the social subsidy a wage. As Fernández Alvarez argues, this is an important political operation carried out by CTEP, which challenges union traditions and identities. But there is also a paradox: recognition of that new class composition and an attempt at unification in terms of income.

However, a critical point of view that allows for thinking about new forms of exploitation and the extraction of value of what I call “proletarian microeconomies” (Gago 2017) in relation to the unity that capital operates today is debt. In this sense, it is important to problematize the very notion of class by focusing on debt as a contemporary apparatus of exploitation that seems to *replace* the wage when it comes to postulating an effective common condition (and therefore of unity) between the dispossessed and the exploited (whether or not waged).

For that reason, *popular economies reveal the debt-consumption relation as a new form of exploitation* (Gago 2015). The debate about popular consumption that has taken place during the years of economic growth following the 2001 crisis in Argentina tends to shift between two poles. Some commentators frame it as the culmination of the forced insertion of impoverished people into a subordinate position in the formal economy, that is, as a rejuvenated form of exploitation. Others stress how plebeian energy can defy austerity mandates. This point is key for rethinking, in a more complex way, what has been called the economic recovery in the cycle of progressive governments in the region, achieved through a neo-extractivist insertion into the global economy.

In this sense, the organizational form of CTEP has had serious difficulties in being able to confront the financialized dimension of these popular economies through its institutional discourses (on this, see the ethnographic work developed in Gago and Roig, 2019).

I want to point out two more points of tension in CTEP that are linked to the very heterogeneity of the notion of class and the challenge of its strategy of representation.

First, the presence of a quasi-majoritarian migrant composition of popular economies whose national origins are diverse is not consistent with a discourse and an evocation of the “national and popular” tradition that follows strict national boundaries in its identification of the subjects of labor. This tension has made itself especially present in the political alliances that CTEP has deployed, as it seeks to be recognized by the major unions.

In this regard, we need to pay more attention to the migrant composition of popular economies, rather than trying to treat popular economies as spheres in which “new subjects” or “sectors” can be detected and classified. This is an approach that privileges the fabrication of new identities over the transformation of social relations, and that prioritizes questions of representation and misrepresentation over ongoing struggles to determine how social wealth is appropriated. The migrant composition of popular economies is a fundamental dynamic in their origin, drive, and versatility, and resists any merely “national” enclosure. Acknowledging this reality helps to expose how exploitation is carried out across sectors that tend to be characterized as excluded, as surplus populations or as simply invisible.

Second, I think it is necessary to place the dynamics of the popular economy into tension with the growing feminized protagonism, in which even feminist economics perspectives and analyses tend to underappreciate (Cavallero and Gago, 2019). This is even more necessary because of the close alliances that one sector of CTEP maintains with the Catholic Church, functioning as an attempt to pacify the vectors of radicalization that are present in the political genealogy of popular economies, also deployed with the feminist movement against the exploitation of domestic work and related to the right to abortion.

Then, of course, heterogeneity does not function as an obstacle to the organization of new union forms, as the hypothesis of Fernández Alvarez’s statement suggests. However, I think it is necessary to problematize the relationship between that heterogeneity and the modes of insubordination in which a good part of its political productivity is rooted.

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