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Beyond trade unions' strategy? The social construction of precarious workers organizing in the city of Buenos Aires

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The paper presents preliminary findings of qualitative research, case study based, on the organization and collective mobilization of two groups of precarious workers in the city of Buenos Aires. Contrary to research that looks at trade unions' institutional strategies for organizing precarious workers and at workers' responses to these, the article starts with a bottom-up approach centred on workers' self-activity. This helps to show empirically how a complex net of structural and contextual factors, which includes the spatial organization of the labour process, the institutional and legal framework and the socio-political context, creates material circumstances that generate processes of workers' association. This approach is rooted in long-standing theoretical debates about the structuring of workers' collective interests and action and helps to ground debates on the perspectives of precarious workers' organization within the context of currently and locally existing capitalist relations rather than in more abstracted trade unions' strategies and responses.

Introduction

In recent years, research on workers' collective organization within the field of industrial relations and the sociology of work has expanded considerably. In advanced countries, this has been partly the result of the changed composition of the labour force and labour market structure, with migrants, who occupy the lowest layers in the labour markets, often at the front of struggle.[1] However, it has also been partly a consequence, hastened by the current economic crisis, of a generalized deterioration of employment and working conditions across societies. After years of virtual neglect, during which the utopia of flexicurity, for instance, dominated in Europe's employment policy and ideological discourse, precariousness seems to be now installed in societies and in the academic debate across social sciences' disciplines. It is probably the expression today of the general, neoliberal, condition of work across the north and south of the world and the formal and informal divide.[2]

Within this context, much of the attention in the field of industrial relations and the sociology of work has been concentrated on trade unions' *responses* to precarious employment

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and working conditions and on the *strategies* that these organizations can and should use to include and organize the growing mass of vulnerable, marginal and precarious workers.[3] Special journal issues and streams at recent conferences[4] further confirm the tendency to frame the issue of precarious workers' representation and organization in terms of unions' institutional actions and strategies. This is true, paradoxically, even for the informal sector in developing countries, where the traditional labour movement has been historically weak and averse, for various reasons, to organize outside the formal sector.[5]

In this paper, I argue that an exclusive focus on unions' *responses and strategies*, as in much of the existing literature, by exchanging the means for the end, offers just a partial and superficial understanding of precarious workers' organization. Limiting the analysis to institutional, 'top down' responses and strategies does not help in delving deep into the social processes conducive to organization and action and identifying what contextual structural factors, material circumstances and concrete possibilities affect precarious workers' daily reality. At the same time, such exclusive focus does not account for the multiple forms of resistance and workers' self-activity that always and logically, considering that precarious workers almost by definition are unorganized and need to build from scratch, precede the formation of an established organization.

Trade unions have been and will probably remain fundamental actors in the struggles for workers' representation nationally and internationally (as, for instance, with the global framework agreements) and will be to a certain extend able to protect, organize and include new groups of precarious workers. However, the institutional, trade unions-centred lens that dominates much of the English-speaking literature in industrial relations and that has dominated labour history,[6] is less well equipped to deal with precarious workers' collective organizing.

Contrary to most of the research on trade unions, in which the analysis departs from existing organizations that play within the rights and obligations set by a specific system of industrial relations and within geographically bounded workplaces, the most important empirical obstacles in the study of precarious workers' collective organizing are, indeed, represented by *absences:* of formalized rules, of established organizations and, often, of easily identifiable workplaces. These absences raise questions on both the methodological approach and the theoretical departure points which should be used to study precarious workers. What sort of moments in the process of collective organizing should be the focus of our empirical research? What sort of actions of resistance should be considered as relevant? What sort of organizational dynamics should be observed? What are the main factors influencing the organizing processes? In a more general term and most importantly, what theoretical framework should we use to study these groups of unprotected, unorganized and, often, for the nature of their work, geographically dispersed workers?

The point of view expressed in this paper is that any analysis of workers' attempts at collective organizing, and above all that of precarious workers, needs to start from the existence of a more general power of self-organization and self-activity on the part of the workers and the working classes. Even trade unions, the organizations that have historically represented, both practically and ideologically, workers' power in societies, before becoming institutions, *are basic defence organizations of the workers, historical products of workers' everyday experience of capitalism*.[7] As such, trade unions are socially constructed organizations whose legitimacy is built on previously existing and collectively experienced issues.[8] This point needs to be remarked upon because, in the majority of the cases, studies of collective organizing are

still biased towards trade unions' strategies and responses, as I have argued above. Also, departing theoretically from the primacy of workers' self-activity, this point helps, methodologically, to set a floor for analysis by identifying those structural and contextual factors that, interacting with workers' agency, shape possibilities of organizing, thus uncovering the socially constructed nature of collective organization and action.

In favouring a bottom-up approach, the article contributes to a growing body of ethnographic research on the micro-contexts of mobilization and organization of unorganized precarious workers, particularly in relation to developing countries.[9] It does so by emphasizing the importance of shared labour processes and working conditions in creating solidarity, mutual bonds and collective identification with the job. While these structural conditions have given an autonomous nature to the two organizing experiences presented in the article, the resilience of the union form in consolidating precarious workers' organization has to be re-evaluated, particularly in highly institutionalized and politically vibrant contexts of labour relations, as in Argentina. However, rather than as an end in itself, the article sees union formation as the end result of an autonomous, but socially and structurally mediated process.

The cases reconstructed in the article are those of workers employed in delivery services (mail, small parcels and food) by bike or motorbike around the city of Buenos Aires, known in Argentina as *motoqueros*, and those involved as sound, light and infrastructure technicians, those workers 'behind the scene' in the organization of events, shows and live concerts.

In both cases, we are dealing with workers employed within the service sector, who have common complains as to the lack of recognition and social protection, fair wages, health and working conditions of their jobs. Both groups are precarious in terms of their employment and income stability, security and collective rights at work, struggling in between self-employment and informal employment. In this sense, the groups are well representative of the informality which has developed in the service-oriented economy of global cities.[10] However, differences in the labour processes, work organization and skills, in the space occupied by these collective of workers within their respective labour and product markets and changes in the socio-economic and institutional sphere surrounding their work activities have differently shaped the types and strategies of resistance, the timing of collective agency and the forms of organizing. Given this diversity, the cases may thus well represent the difficulty we encounter, in general, when thinking about precariousness and its relations with workers' organizing. While precariousness exists as a category of analysis useful for identifying shifts in the configuration of labour within current processes of capitalist accumulation, it is not characterized by homogeneous conditions and this makes difficult any attempts at organizing precarious workers 'from above'. Different groups will be affected by precariousness in different ways and will thus try to react against the most direct consequences of it on their immediate living and working conditions by way of different processes of collective organizing, including, although not exclusively, via trade unions and depending on existing legislation, institutional framework and socio-political conditions.

In this sense, setting the cases within the context of Argentina offers a particularly rich set of variables, possibly affecting organization. Compared to other emerging or developing economies, in Argentina, workers have historically benefited from an extended system of labour rights protection guaranteed by legislation that empowered trade unions at institutional and workplace levels.[11] In the recent decades, the full implementation of neoliberal policies has increasingly made employment more precarious for the majority of the population, across the formal and informal sectors of the economy. Nevertheless, the

power trade unions wield at national level as institutions legally representing workers is still considerable and thus makes union recognition for precarious, informally employed sector workers a fundamental, though hard to get and long-term, objective. For this reason, the cases presented, while born out of independent, grass-roots, self-organized experiences, confirm the importance and resilience of the union form, in the Argentinean context and beyond, in consolidating precarious workers' organization.

Locating precarious workers' collective agency

Trade unions have usually been the subject of research in industrial relations and continue to remain central, at least in the English-speaking world, to progressive research about workers, either when discussing about voice,[12] organizing strategy,[13] social movement unionism and renewal[14] or mobilization theory.[15] These organizations have historically been the most important actors in the construction of a social citizenship for the working class and have represented this latter's most representative form of organization at both political and workplace levels.[16] For these reasons and the institutionally powerful role of the trade union movement in many countries, it is plausible that contemporary research on the organization of precarious workers continues to focus on 'unions' *responses* and *strategies'*. Yet, this runs the risk of ignoring the specific contextual and structural dynamics conducive to organization, and of compressing workers' action into the institutional sphere, thus missing the class/movement dimension of workers' collective organization. More importantly, by formatting organization in the precarious sector to union strategies from above, the multiple and alternative forms that can precede or replace the union form in the creation of a sense of collective interests among workers can be missed. The need to find sources and spaces for collective interests' formation is fundamental and a pre-condition to the association of workers.[17] For precarious workers, which are often geographically dispersed and forced to compete among each other, establishing inclusive channels of communication and collective sharing outside the workplace has proven to be crucial to the long-term success of recent organizing experiences.[18]

What I propose in this article is thus a radical change of perspective that, starting from the principle of workers' self-activity, advocates an analysis of the organization of precarious workers, as it actually occurs in specific contexts and sectors rather than as a strategy.

Before exploring this perspective in the empirical part of the article, in the two following sub-sections, firstly, I outline the theoretical underpinnings of workers' self-activity and then focus on how different sources of workers' power in the construction of collective organizing (the type of technology/labour process, the position in the market and in the space/landscape occupied by workers) interact and are shaped by socio-political and institutional variables.

Workers' self-activity

Different conceptualizations and explanations of the nature of workers' self-activity can be found in many strands of research on labour across the social sciences. Studies in global labour history have demonstrated how not just waged, but also unfree workers have repeatedly contested the forms and terms of the exploitation of their labour by rebellions that, initially spontaneous in nature, have often consolidated into more stable organizations.[19] The history of the trade unions all over the world and the internal dynamics of these organizations

could not be understood without reference to forms of grassroots mobilization and organization, generated by the contradiction of the labour-capital relation within the workplace. Trade unions are contradictory organizations shaped by capitalist relations and forced to institutionalization, but which are born out of movements expressing working class' interests fundamentally divergent from those of capital.[20] These movements are constitutive of trade unions' organizational power. As Eric Hobsbawm argued some time ago, commenting on Fox Piven and Clowards study about the organization of poor workers' movements,[21] 'mass union organization, in the US of the 1930s as in all analogous "explosions" of labour unionism with which I am familiar, was the result of workers mobilization and not its cause'.[22] Similarly, historical accounts of workers' attempts at controlling production, emphasizing the role of workers' commissions and assemblies in the events, are a further proof of how 'from below' forms of workers' organization, with an alternative and potentially revolutionary character, can emerge in particular moments of history.[23]

Survival strategies, collective forms of self-defence and mutual aids, have often been put in place by subordinate groups in authoritarian contexts, constituting what Scott has described so accurately as 'everyday hidden forms of resistance'.[24] Not all types of opposition find an expression in forms of open resistance nor this is always framed in collective terms, but working people experiencing common exploitation are relentlessly experimenting with practices that challenge the constituted social order, contributing to the historical 'making', as E.P. Thompson[25] would have put it, of a collective working-class identity.

This 'history from below' perspective on working-class formation has been matched by studies in historical comparative sociology. Beverly Silver,[26] for instance, has shown how the formation and actions of the working class have been a powerful factor in determining the spatial, productive, technological or financial fixes used by global capitalism in different world regions as alternative strategies to keep up with acceptable levels of accumulation.

From a political sociology perspective, Francis Fox Piven has recently argued that globalization is creating new opportunities for the exercise of power from below. In an increasingly interconnected and interdependent world, in which the role of the human factor remains fundamental in both capital and labour-intensive productions, even unrepresented and unprotected workers lacking resources would be in position of potential power in defence of their interests. This interdependent power, as Fox Piven calls it, exists simply because *social life is cooperative life and, in principle, all people who make contributions to these systems of cooperation have potential power over others who depend on them.*[27]

Drawing from the Marxist autonomous tradition, workers' agency can be seen as one of the most powerful factors influencing technological change, and thus driving the development of capitalism. As argued by John Holloway,[28] the autonomous power of working people can be seen in the many ways through which people oppose every day the imperative of capital, by rejecting and refusing conformity. The continuous process of commodification of social lives together with the apparent impossibility of revolutionary change has extended social antagonism, in Holloway's view, to all sphere of life. Indeed, in a context in which the struggles for the defence of wages and working conditions, traditionally led by trade unions, are not able to deliver results to the majority of the working population, and with new spaces of social life increasingly dominated by the market, opposition will tend to go beyond workplace struggles over the terms and conditions of work.

Workers' self-activity can be thus considered as a theoretically and historically valid category. But it is also a useful departure point in the study of processes of collective organizing,

characterized by the 'absences' of the precarious sector since it forces us to go beyond a focus on the *organization* per se and rather to look at the complexity of its formation. In this process, workers carry on various types of activities. Some go unnoticed, might be just problems solving and limited in scope, localized and spontaneous, not overtly conflictive and often contradictory. Others, on the contrary, might involve a more direct and planned involvement, as with the organization of a collective mobilization. Both are nonetheless extremely important in understanding processes of collective organization since they are undoubtedly the empirical manifestations of the limits and possibilities of workers' agency. What are then the structural and contextual factors whose interaction with workers' agency can consistently affect precarious workers' collective organizing?

Workers' structural power, the institutional framework and socio-political context

Belanger and Edwards[29] offer a useful framework for reflection on what they call 'structuring influences on patterns of contestation'. Technology, product markets and institutional arrangements are seen as the main factors from whose combination different workplace regimes, and thus different forms of contestation, can emerge. Technology and the work organization that incorporate this might be important in certain contexts. However, changes produced by technological innovations can influence workers' resistance in different ways.[30] While technology can individualize the experience of work, as in the case of the call centres described by Belanger and Edwards, it can also empower specific groups of workers, whose technological skills are required or whose job is strategically placed within a production process. Similarly, while technology (particularly communication) is increasingly introduced in different jobs, there is still a large sector of labour-intensive precarious employment, in which technology plays a marginal role (personal services or logistics, for instance). Finally, the use of technology as a form of exercising direct control is virtually impossible in the absence of a clearly spatially defined workplace and when workers have spaces of autonomy or work independently. In all these cases, as in the cases considered in this research, workers react to the alienating and exploitative conditions of their work but not directly to a specific workplace regime of discipline and control facilitated by the use of technology. Thus, technology has a potential influence in the sphere of workers' organizing, but these need to be assessed case by case. The other two sets of structuring factors identified by Belanger and Edwards, product markets and institutional arrangements, are equally central to our discussion. Competition and labour markets clearly make certain group of workers more vulnerable or, on the contrary, more strategically placed than others, increasing or decreasing their overall structural power. This is what Beverly Silver[31] calls, drawing from Olin Wright,[32] their *marketplace bargaining power* (that which results directly from tight labour market) or their *workplace bargaining power* (that which derives from the location of a particular group of workers within a key industrial sector). Depending on their relative structural power, workers would be more or less compelled to search for another source of power, *associational power*, that derives from the collective organizations of workers, typically in trade unions and political parties. According to Silver,[33] textile workers in the nineteenth century and immigrant cleaners today, such as those of the Justice for Janitors campaign, would be well-representative examples of workers' transhistorical ability to shifts and counterbalance between different sources of power. This analysis certainly holds for a large number of precarious workers today. The instability, high labour turnover, subcontracting and illegality

characterize much of precarious employment and fragment the labour force into myriads of small interests groups; if this, on the one hand, debilitates workers' structural power, on the other hand, it can create within societies a fertile soil for the development of spaces of collective sharing that goes beyond the strictly individual workplace. Civil society's campaigns, as with the London living wage,[34] trade unions-led alliances with community-based ethnic or religious groups,[35] workers' centres as in the USA that offer legal help to migrant workers[36] and micro-credit schemes to foster organization in India[37] are recent successful examples of 'social movements type' organization building among precarious workers that takes the community rather than the workplace as the main site of resistance and organization.

Different sources of power in the construction of collective organizing, however, cannot be assessed in isolation. The socio-political context in which the organizing drive takes place and the legal and institutional rules within which collective actions are framed and conflict is negotiated, by shaping the material reality in which workers are daily enmeshed, pose limits or offer possibilities to the concrete strategies followed by workers.

Fox Piven and Cloward's now classic study of 'poor people's movements',[38] which included the 'precarious' US industrial workers movement of the 1930s, very clearly highlighted the nexus existing between time of protests and existing institutional conditions and between these latter and the usually limited space of action by protest movements. On the one hand, they argued that only in disruptive times of history could protests by the lower classes erupt and contest existing institutional structures since 'protest wells up in response to momentous changes in the institutional order. It is not created by organizers or leaders'.[39] On the other hand, they argued that *the opportunities for defiance are structured by feature of institutional life. Simply put, people cannot defy institutions to which they have no access, and to which they make no contribution.*[40] This early analysis on the link existing between time of protest, institutional structures and people's location within these is echoed in more recent geographical analyses of labour agency. From this perspective, it is stressed that it is necessary to look at labour agency as a social process that, while directly affected by existing institutional forms, is also *grounded or re-embedded in the space-time contexts of which it is a constituent process.*[41] From a geographical point of view, workers' location within the production process and in the class structure, the material landscapes in which they live, the scale and the timing of their action are primary factors in shaping agency. Within these factors, timing is particularly important since there are times in which institutions can be openly contested, rules can be more flexible and spaces within the socially existing structure can thus be opened for workers' organizing. In this perspective, Chun,[42] for instance, has recently underlined how, in South Korea and the USA, similar groups of marginalized workers have been able to build their power on 'symbolic leverage', using socially accepted democratic values of justice and fairness against institutional arrangements that failed to protect them. Similarly, Fine[43] argues that in the USA, the so-called workers' centre, that organizes low-wage workers across different economic sectors, has improved wages and working conditions for their members more by putting pressure on public policies and institutions via public opinion, rather than directly negotiating in the labour market. This is a point also made recently by Agarwala[44] in her research in India. In Argentina, as it will be described in the following section, the regulatory power in the field of labour relations, bestowed by legislation from the Ministry of Labour, makes workers' collective organizing and representation extremely dependent on political-institutional decisions, and thus on the socio-economic context that justifies these decisions.

From the discussion presented in the above sub-sections, it emerges a quite complex picture of workers' organizing. We departed from the theoretical and historical validity of workers' self-activity. This can be considered as a genetic component of work relations within capitalism. Workers' self-activity, that is workers' assertion as a social collective subject demanding change, encounters various obstacles in its realization or, putting it the other way round, can be facilitated by the combination of specific factors, empowering workers. These factors, as shown in the previous discussion, can be grouped into two macro categories: those concerning the organization of work and the location of the productive activity within the market context and those concerning the socio-political context and institutional arrangements within which workers' activity is inserted. In the following sections, using material from the cases, I will try to map the organizing processes by reference to these macro areas of influencing factors.

Methodology

The findings presented in this paper are part of a case study-based and qualitative research on the organization and collective mobilization of precarious workers in the city of Buenos Aires conducted in 2012–2013. Overall, the research, part of an EU sponsored research fellowship, aimed to offer an overview of the forms, processes and contexts of organizing in the urban space by looking at differences in sectors of activities, workers' skills and labour processes. In this paper, however, the focus is on two specific groups of workers: delivery workers and stage technicians, both from the service sector of the economy. In one case, that of the delivery workers organized through SIMECA (*Sindicato Independiente de Mensajeros y Cadetes*), the organization had disappeared at the time of fieldwork, so the organizing process had to be reconstructed using a more historically focused methodology. Oral interviews and analyses of data found in secondary sources (union pamphlets, online material, published interviews with leaders in left-wing magazines, press reports of conflicts or videos posted on YouTube) represented the main sources of information. In the case of the stage technicians, organized through UTRA (Unión de Técnicos de la República Argentina), currently going through a process of organization, the same techniques of data collection have been combined with participant observation of general meetings.

The two cases of organizing are located in two quite specific socio-political contexts: one of crisis and social instability and another of economic growth and institutional stability. The comparison allows to see how the oscillations between these different contexts have shaped mobilization and organizational perspectives and outcomes (as argued in details in the following section).

Interview questions were clustered around the following issues: the labour process (skills requirements and work flow spatial organization), the sector of activity and business location within the market structure, spaces and resources for organizing, relations with politics and existing trade unions, individual experiences of struggles and their role, democracy and decision-making processes within the organisations and methods and forms of struggle.

In many cases, the people interviewed were activists or had an active participation in the organization. This, depending on the kind of research, might raise some methodological concerns since activists' views will always remain that of a minority. However, considering the aims of the research, activists' central role in organizing made interviews with them fundamental when gathering essential data.

The socio-political context and institutional structures of workers' representation

Compared to other Latin-American countries, employment in Argentina has been historically, up until the end of the 1980s, highly concentrated within the formal sector of the economy. This has been partly the results of successive processes of industrialization beginning in the 1930s, and led by import substitution policies, and partly a consequence of the strong political role achieved by the trade unions in Argentine's society. Starting from 1943 with Colonel Peron arrival at the government, the labour movement was gradually integrated within the Peronist movement, of which it became a structural component.[45] This political insertion produced important legislation that protected workers' activism in the workplaces (granting legal representation at shop-floor level through the so-called *comisiones internas*), extended social security and empowered trade unions. These were granted financial resources, monopoly of workers' representation in collective bargaining, protection for unions' officials and against anti-unions practices. Thus, until approximately the end of the 1980s, when a massive process of neoliberal reforms started with President Menem, the large majority of the Argentine workforce was covered by legislation and unions maintained high level of membership, density, political mobilization and, overall, social recognition.[46] The flip side of trade unions' empowerment was the creation of a system of industrial relations heavily regulated by the State, a system which has remained firmly in place in contemporary Argentina. While workers, in principle, can freely associate and autonomously decide on the form of their representation, a legal authorization granted by the Ministry of Labour to the most representative union in a specific sector, the so-called *personeria gremial*, is necessary for negotiation, the signing of collective agreements and the representation of workers before employers or courts. As a consequence, the system of workers' representation is highly centralized and subjected to political intervention. This monopoly of representation empowers the formal union representatives of the sector but creates deficits in terms of internal democracy, which have often led to anti-bureaucratic grass-roots struggles[47] and, most importantly for precarious workers, does not flexibly adapt to the representation of workers in unregulated sectors of activity. As workers argued:

> Complying with Argentine trade unions legislation is rather difficult. Now that we are trying to get recognition the Ministry of Labour is raising lots of objections, for instance that we have too many self-employed among our members! But that's exactly what we want to change! (UTRA national committee, interview with author)

> The reality is that labour law does not allow you to build a new union or to take over an existing one, especially if this is in the hands of bureaucrats. There are no 'easy to use' legal tools. For instance, for being recognized, they ask for you a minimum of members regularly employed. But if the situation is one in which nobody is regularly employed you cannot even start the process of legal recognition! Every step that the State asks you to do is an impossible step, despite grassroots support. The Argentine trade unions' structure does not guarantee workers' association rights. The biggest problem for workers in the precarious sector is the way in which legislation regulate trade unions. (SIMECA member)

The process of neoliberal reforms that started in the 1990s increased this problem of representation. Unemployment, outsourcing, flexibility and privatization of public utilities contributed to create a two-tier labour force in the formal economy and an overall increase in unregistered workers. In both the public and private sectors, formerly protected and regulated jobs were substituted by all sorts of individual, temporary or atypical employment

contracts or were disguised by forms of forced self-employment or by false cooperatives. These trends have been partly reversed in recent years in the context of the economic recovery that started in 2003. Unregistered employees count today for approximately a third of the whole Argentinean labour force compared to a pick of 50% in 2003.[48] However, registration does not necessarily indicate less precariousness. This is so partly because aggregate numbers hide from view the level of precariousness existing in sectors with historically high levels of informality such as construction, commerce and domestic/personal services[49] and partly because the majority of the population lives on salaries whose level is still well below the average family income. Thus, precariousness, in its various forms, seems now an established trend, despite government discourses about the creation of genuine decent jobs and legislation promoting regulation and protection for some of the most exploitative type of work, such as domestic services.

Thus, considering the limitations imposed by the institutional and legislative framework, precarious workers in the informal sector who start to organize have few options in front of them. Once they have successfully overcome the individualization and fragmentation that characterize many of their jobs and have eventually established an informal organization, they can hope for an improvement of their working and salary conditions and for a consolidation of their organization either by following the step for their formal recognition as the union representative for the sector or by integration into an existing union. In this decision, the political context is very important and the organizing processes in the two cases should be seen bearing this in mind.

The case of the *motoqueros* is the direct result of processes of privatization and outsourcing of services that were previously parts of private companies' and public administrations' internal organizations and of the growth of delivery services (especially food) in modern cities. In this sense, it is quite emblematic of the ways in which precariousness and informality have been produced by the effects of neoliberal globalization on global cities, within which Buenos Aires is probably included. As Sassen[50] rightly remarked, processes of privatization, deregulation, the growing importance of the service and financial sector and the speed of economic activities imposed by technological innovations in communications are indeed among the factors that produce informalization and precariousness. These factors are endogenous to the accumulation model dominating in a large metropolis, which hosts headquarters and centralizes activities. This tendency has been, however, further exacerbated by the massive and drastic way in which neoliberal policies have been implemented in Argentina, particularly during the 1990s. These produced, in the short term, growing inequality in terms of income and working conditions with high unemployment and, in the medium term, a socio-economic crisis of huge proportions that, starting in the second half of the 1990s, erupted with the default crisis of December 2001.

The *motoqueros'* collective organizing has been deeply influenced by the development of this crisis. They started to organize, at the end of 1999, in the midst of struggles against government's economic policies. A vast array of social forces including state and municipal employees, the newly born movement of unemployed, left political parties and other territorial-based organizations of disadvantaged population sectors took action with strikes, marches and roadblocks of growing intensity and violence. All this offered the most profitable environment and examples of action for the emergence of an organization among one of the most exploited, dangerous and unrewarded of the industries created within the new deregulated economy of the 1990s (they called themselves 'the miners of the XXI

century' with reference to their dirty, polluted and dangerous 'workplaces'). The events of the 20 and 21 December 2001, when a social rebellion dramatically exploded in the streets of Buenos Aires and other major cities in Argentina, gave the public visibility to *motoqueros*' incipient organization, SIMECA, which participated in street riots and confrontation with police to resist repression. The state of permanent social mobilization that followed in the first years after the crisis shaped the strategies adopted by the organization, based on direct action, roadblocks and occupations of public spaces, and helped its consolidation. Since the beginning, SIMECA was characterized by independence from political parties, democratic decision-making and an approach to problems that resembled more that of a social organization than that of a conventional trade union. However, the stabilization of the economy and sustained growth since 2003 reshaped the landscape within which collective organizing was to be inserted for being politically accepted, favouring more institutionalized, trade union- based forms of workers' representation. As an activist argued:

> At the beginning we used to say that we did not need state recognition, we could put 400 motorbikes in front of the Ministry of Labour and set it on fire. We were not interested in being defined as a union or not, we were the motor bikers! In 2001 we were not interested, we had our people on the street, making barricades against the bourgeois legality, we went to the front, no problem, the matter was easy. After this we started to realize that we could not sign a collective agreement, we were gaining conflicts against the employers but we were nothing. (SIMECA former activist, interview with author)

After years of fruitless attempts at organizing the sector's workers along the institutional path while keeping their organization politically independent, the government recognized workers' representation through a newly formed trade union affiliated to the CGT.[51] The formal recognition to a different organization implied the disappearance of SIMECA, but represented, for some of the workers in the sector, the achievement of many, of the rights to fair employment and working conditions for which SIMECA had struggled for many years.

The experience of 'behind the scene' workers represents a more recent and ongoing attempt at collective organizing, which followed the exponential growth of the cultural and entertainment industries in Argentina, fuelled, over the last decade, by the favourable economic conditions that stimulated cultural consumption. While stage technicians (sound, lights and infrastructure) working in the film, television and radio industries have been historically organized within trade unions, the rest of workers in the sector, particularly those employed in the organization of music events and tours and in small theatres, have always been excluded from regulation. This, and the growing competition among events producers, cutting down on labour costs, has further exacerbated the lack of protection suffered by these groups of workers. In this context and within an industrial relations climate favouring, at least in its discourse, the institutionalization and legislative regulation of precarious workers' claims, stage technicians formed a union, UTRA, in 2010 with the aim of getting state recognition.

> We thought about organizing into a trade union because in the current political moment the creation of trade unions it is seen in a favourable way. As a trade union with legal recognition we could organize by getting the protection of the existing labour laws, something which we could not get simply remaining as an association, for instance. Moreover, beyond the fact that today trade unions have again taken central stage, I think many of us identify politically and culturally with the idea of trade unionism. (UTRA national committee, interview with author)

By contrast with the *motoqueros,* who organized and mobilized workers around specific sector claims in the heat of social mobilization, stage technicians adopted a non-conflictive

strategy of organizing centred on the formal recognition of their union. Yet, this, while imposed by the existing legislative system, involves a long and uncertain process of political negotiation which generates tensions within the collective of workers.

> Until the moment we get the personeria gremial (full legal recognition) we are into the mist, in a formation phase. Personally I think this process is taking too long but we reached a consensus that we would organize within the legal framework. Security guards working in discotheques, night clubs and music events (known as patovica in Argentina) got personeria gremial from the Ministry of Labour by picketing and protesting. They got it by force … it's a matter of different strategies and politics, but I think many would join us if we took another stance. (UTRA regional delegate, interview with author)

By contrast, another worker argued that:

> We have to be very careful with the sort of collective action we use. In the apolitical and disenchanted society we live in today it would be difficult to sustain it. We would be under attack by media and public opinion. At the moment, if we say 'tomorrow we go on strike because we are all precarious and working informally', we are not going to get enough support. (UTRA national committee, interview with author)

It is very difficult, however, to draw a clear frontier line between legality and illegality in the organization of precarious workers. On the one hand, without collective confrontational actions, precarious workers and their organization would continue to remain invisible and divisions and atomization would persist. On the other hand, by the same actions, they would be exposed to employer retaliation and would risk to be ostracized by the institutional apparatus, as was clearly the case with SIMECA. In this sense, the existence of a specific socio-political climate favouring more or less confrontational approaches can change the balance of forces, as the history of the labour movement worldwide has shown us.

Beyond this historical truth, the point that needs to be considered, and which can explain differences between groups of precarious workers, is how to build an organization starting from the concrete, material conditions in which the activities of each specific group of workers are placed. Here, the analysis of the work process and of the space and location occupied by this in the production process helps to identify other factors that can facilitate workers' collective association and their accumulation of power.

Work organization and space

The Motoqueros

The work of the *motoqueros* is organized in a way similar to that of the taxi drivers. They depend on an agency, often very small, that distributes the calls for the delivery of documents and small parcels among the workers on duty, depending on availability and on the proximity of the driver to the receiving and/or destination addresses. However, they can also work for an outsourcing agency that provides drivers to businesses (especially food companies) that offer home delivery of their products or work directly for the same companies. Depending on this, their working time and areas of delivery will change. They own a bike or motorbike with which they perform the delivery and take charge of its maintenance and repairs. While the recent recognition of a trade union representative for the sector's workers has produced positive changes in terms of working conditions and salaries for workers regularly employed (monthly salaries, insurance against work accident, employers' social security contributions), the level of informality and related precariousness in the sector is

still very high and similar to the situation suffered by workers in 1999, when they started to organize. Since wages outside the formal sector of this business are often made up from the sum of individual trips, as on a piece rate basis, long working hours and driving at high speed are used to enhance earnings, but this constantly exposes workers to life-threatening road accidents. Apparently, autonomous and free from direct control in their work, flexible in terms of when they work, contracted and paid on an individual basis and individually in charge of their own security, the *motoqueros* are in reality squeezed by a competitive labour market which, being de-personalized and diffuse, acts as an all-powerful instrument of control and regulation of the work activity. This competition in the labour market can be explained by a number of factors. The skills required to drive a motorbike in city traffic, the knowledge of streets and of the quickest way to reach destination points are often built-in expertise of young city-dwellers.[52] The capital necessary to buy a second-hand motorbike does not represent an overwhelming obstacle. The long working shifts, often outside normal working hours, at night and over weekends, makes the job attractive, especially to young people who have flexibility of time, high energy and no family responsibilities, thus allowing them to live more easily on the wages offered.

Against this picture, in which labour market competition, the atomized nature of the labour process and the absence of a physically identifiable workplace tend to produce an individualization of the work experience; one may wonder how workers have been able to find spaces of association to discuss their collective interests, and thus on what basis they have been able to build resistance and organization.

Insights from interviews reveal, however, a quite distinct picture in which the harshness and individuality of the job allow room for the emergence of solidarity.

> When, after a rainy winter week, you finally arrive to a Friday afternoon to drink a mate (typical argentine infusion) with the other guys that have suffered like you, this produces very strong, very human ties, which later on in the street get transformed into solidarity … our job is highly individual, you are alone in the street, the boss threaten you, cars crowd you, police ask for bribe and the only person that can help you is another delivery worker who has experienced the same situations as you did. (SIMECA unpublished material)

However, what facilitated this process was not just the precarious working conditions and claims they had in common, a situation similar to that of many unorganized workers, but also the concrete possibilities for sharing complains, as offered by the particular working context. In this sense, working in the street on of a motorbike, while individualizing their work experience, allowed the *motoqueros* to be extremely mobile, always interconnected via mobiles and radio and visible to each other. This led initially to organization in small groups, formed spontaneously in the street during rest and lunch hours and based on networks of personal relations. This informal organizing based on sharing common complains was then reinforced everyday in the streets. Thus, even in the absence of a physically delineated workplace, that may facilitate communication and collective sharing, the *motoqueros* have been able to organize by adapting and sustaining their organization to the specific conditions of their work, which imposes individualization, but with this also the conditions for the association of workers. Workers would frame this in terms of the existence of a *motoquero* code or defined identity:

> We used to say that SIMECA could have remained without a building, since it could be in every place each of us was in. Each motoquero was the union. Without a building or a place to go, the only possibility is to build it and nourish it with a collective identity. So we used to dress in dark,

we spoke a bit strangely with our slang, we had codes and behaviors that, for instance, banking employees do not have. (SIMECA member, interview with author)

This collective identity was going beyond the specific conditions of work and was not the result of predefined ideas about unionism and politics. The *motoqueros* were usually young, came from working-class/poor neighbourhoods, with scarce or no work experience. This and the context of socio-economic crisis which favoured direct actions made them rebellious and independent in a broader sense. However, at the same time, this made them more focused on the resolution of immediate problems than on the long-term building of a stable organization:

SIMECA had a corporate spirit, we thought just about SIMECA and outside politics, without Kirchner (former Argentine's president) or any other politician. We had to build an organization from scratch and we had to think about our comrades suffering and dying from traffic accidents. Thinking about el kirchnerismo (politics in general) was too much for us, a super-structural question! We had to discuss and take decisions, organize actions and conflicts, this and that … and time was running against us. (SIMECA member, interview with author)

Stage technicians

The work of stage and behind the scene technicians is very different from that of the *motoqueros*. It is unusual in combining high levels of exploitation with worker's creativity and autonomy in the production process. This is partly due to the tendency, within the theatrical and more general cultural industry, to contract workers only when required and for the time necessary for the production of the event and, partly, for the knowledge and skills required by the service these workers are offering. This situation is highly contradictory. On the one hand, workers experience the production process as extremely energy-consuming, stressful and demanding. Being continuously in and out of work, a condition that might be called structural flexibility, indeed forces workers to work long days over relatively short periods, when their jobs are mostly required and very often to accept whatever job is offered to compensate for periods of unemployment. Moreover, since competition in the sector forces event producers to cut costs, especially labour costs, menial and support tasks are normally added to the technicians' main activity with the result that the level of exploitation is further increased. On the other hand, since their contribution is often essential to the production of a performance-based commodity that has a cultural and artistic content, their work is organized around spaces of individual autonomy and creativity in co-ordination with the rest of the people involved in the technical and artistic production of the events, which makes their work experience extremely, though momentarily, gratifying.

I like the creative part of my work, there is where I can work with autonomy. When I am contracted to design the lights in a music show, I propose and discuss my ideas and plans with the band; they may like them or not, they may or not have the budget to cover it, but it gives me the possibility to value my work, it's like selling something. (UTRA national committee)

If you do not like this job after just a month you give up, but if you like it is like a way of life. (UTRA regional delegate)

These contradictions between exploitation and creativity which are experienced individually by each worker partly explain how difficult it is for these groups of workers to see themselves as a collective with similar interests and contributing with their cooperative work to the creation of the same product. As opposed to the *motoqueros*, whose labour process

is geographically dispersed but always the same, continuous and common to all of them, technicians specialize in various areas (lights, sound and infrastructure), perform different tasks during the same events and work for limited periods of time. While they have, for the duration of the event, a physically defined workplace and must cooperate in the creation of the final product, they operate more individually than as a group for the specialized nature of their work. Similarly, the type and budgets of the events for which they are being contracted, and the fact that they can be employed by big or small production companies, might mean differences in the nature of their assignments, shifting the balance between the creative and labour-intensive side of their work and at the same time creating different levels of responsibility. Moreover, the fact that they are normally contracted by a production company but provide their services to a third party (company, individual artist or organization), each with its own demands but with unclear spaces of responsibility, creates a confused situation for workers who often do not know who they have to blame for their conditions. As observed during a workers' meeting, all these variables make the establishment of a common set of rules and value/conditions of work, on which all workers can agree as particularly complex.

In addition to these problems, deriving from the specifics of the work organization and the events-bound geography of the technicians' work, the structure of the business sector in which they operate contributes towards increasing the range of attitudes that workers assume with respect to the defence of their work. The growth of the entertainment and cultural industry has produced a vertical integration of activities. Small companies that pioneered the sector in the early 1990s, starting as provider of specialized services, have grown into event production companies, offering clients a tailored, comprehensive package of products. However, this shift in the business objective of many companies has not corresponded to a growth in the size of those companies since these have mainly continued to operate informally, outsourcing the technical aspects of the shows to smaller companies, often created by former technicians transformed into businessman. As a worker argued with reference to this:

> The informality continues to be the same, they move from a labour informality to a business informality; you continue employing people without registration or contract, you do work yourself without rules. Thus it is the same but on a different scale and this makes competition within the sector ferocious. (UTRA regional delegate, interview with author)

The UTRA experience offers a clear statement of the potentiality for collective organizing of the so-called 'immaterial' labour. This effectively plays a fundamental role in the labour process necessary to cultural and artistic creation, which increasingly depends on the knowledge of workers. This central position and the high dependency of capital on this labour, definitely put workers in the position of representing at least a constant threat to capital accumulation when they withdraw their labour. However, the differences we have just outlined are a clear obstacle against the collective organization of these workers. They would argue repeatedly that these differences reinforce individualism, which is seen as an almost inevitable aspect of the job, not least because the work has, for many, an almost narcissistic aspect, deriving from the fact that it is often performed in contact with artistic stars and in an environment of so-called celebrities.

> Nobody really wants to renounce his individual quota; there are lots of fears: of participation, of compromise, of the phrase "trade union". We are at the moment unprotected and exposed to retaliations, this is a real fear. But at the same time there are many who work just for a credential

and are afraid of losing their status in the artistic environment. (UTRA national committee, interview with author)

While individualism might to a certain extent characterize the job, we need to carefully consider this as a condition created by the existence of material circumstances hampering the collectivization of interests necessary for the development of collective organizing. Notwithstanding these circumstances and the UTRA strategy of getting recognition by staying within the legality, which implies a non-conflictive attitude, small groups of workers are constantly organizing, though in informal ways and for very specific and localized issues. In a sector in which labour represents the most important cost for the employers, this collective activity is a natural, defensive response by workers in fighting to keep their labour decently rewarded. This is of foremost importance in a country like Argentina that has price increases of about 30% every year. Informal negotiations on the price of labour thus take place on a continuous basis in most different locations in which events are planned. While the introduction of software and computerized technology is increasing labour market competition, the event-based nature of the activity, the need to obtain from technicians a qualitatively enriched form of productivity and the benefits deriving from widespread collaboration, often forces employers to give concessions.

Conclusions

Contrary to research focusing on trade unions' responses and strategies for organizing precarious workers, which very often is limited to an analysis of top-down, institutional decisions, in this article, the attention has been centred on the concrete, material circumstances and contextual factors that have accompanied the organizing process of two groups of precarious workers in the city of Buenos Aires. By engaging with the lively, 'bread and butter' reality of the workers, locating the spatial organization of their work within the existing socio-political and institutional context, the article has put in evidence how workers' self-activity rather than institutional strategies has been crucial to initiate their collective association. In this sense, the article has rehabilitated a movement-, class-oriented approach to an understanding of the dynamics of precarious workers' organizing. As many strands of research in the study of labour have emphasized, capitalist exploitation, the everyday need of extracting value from workers in a context of market competition, is what constantly creates conditions that favour workers' spontaneous association. This, however, emerges in different forms, times and scales depending on the labour process, the contextual structure, the institutional framework and the balance of forces existing at a certain point in time and place. The two cases presented in the article offer paradigms of these dynamics. Delivery workers, despite the individual nature of their job, have been able to start building their organization on the basis of the collective suffering caused by poor working conditions. The mobility associated with the job facilitated collective sharing, identity and the establishment of solidarity links. The context of social unrest during the 2001 crisis helped consolidate the movement/mobilization side of the emerging organization. However, with the return to economic growth and political stability and trade union-led industrial relations, SIMECA was forced into a process of institutionalization and 'normalization', which was at odds with its grassroots identity, and finally destroyed the organization. In contrast with SIMECA members, stage technicians have strong workplace bargaining power due to the central position their work occupies in the production of entertainments. Nevertheless, these have followed an inverse path in

their organizing process, preferring to build the organization first by following the political/ normative procedures existing for union recognition in Argentina. This partly responds to the current climate of industrial relations, favourable to unions, employment regulations and collective bargaining and partly acknowledges the need for stage technicians to find spaces for collective sharing and collective identity building other than those 'precariously' and momentarily created during the production of an event. In this sense, the everyday activities that need to be done to nurture the growth of the organization help overcome the divisions and individualism that exist within the sector's workers.

What general insights these two examples of organization building offer in relation to future studies of precarious workers' organization?

The most obvious, but also the most powerful, is that workers, however precarious their conditions, can always find ways to collectively fight back. However, in order to understand the different strategies that this involves and the forms these ways take, we should move beyond analyses of precarious workers centred exclusively on trade unions. Trade unions are probably the best organizational form for workers, the one that most clearly captures their collective identity; but they should be seen as the end result of a process rooted in material circumstances rather than as ends in themselves.

The informality, vulnerability, atomization and competition that characterize the experience of many groups of precarious workers should invite us to look for alternative spaces/ times of collective sharing and organization outside of the traditional workplace. Mobility and the urban context in one case, the event-dependent and culture-related work organization in an another case are just examples of how workers performing jobs in non-traditional workplaces in the service sector of a big city can nonetheless find spaces for collective sharing and organization. This adds to other factors which have been considered in previous research, such as with the neighbourhoods and close communities where workers live, the social networks in which they participate, their gender and ethnic identification.

In the process of organization, state bodies and institutions play a fundamental political role. On the one hand, these drive workers' claims within the channels of existing legislation, thus setting the limits and forms of workers' organization. On the other hand, these are the direct objectives of workers' demands, acting at the level of social policy.

Within the growing economic informality of urban contexts, in which precariousness is increasingly becoming the condition of existence for entire generations of workers, work-related demands have begun to develop into broader struggles for social inclusion and citizenship. As the recent mobilizations of migrants in advanced countries or the history of the once 'precarious' labour movement have shown, particularly in time of crisis when institutions are contested, the demand for dignified work becomes one with that of full participation in society. The extent to which states will be able to control, respond, be permeable or lead these demands will probably be crucial for developing perspectives, not just over the future forms and limits of precarious workers' organizing, but also over the role of value producers in future societies.

Notes

1. Adler, Tapia, and Turner, *Mobilizing against Inequality*; Dyer, McDowell and Batnitzky, "Migrant Work"; Milkman, *L.A. Story;* Milkman, "Immigrant Workers, Precarious Work"; and Milkman and Ott, *New Labor in New York.*

2. Atzeni, *Workers and Labour*; Kalleberg, "Job Quality and Precarious Work"; Standing, *The Precariat*; and Barchiesi, *Precarious Liberation*.

3. Benassi and Dorigatti, "Straight to the Core"; Wright, "The Response of Unions"; Mrozowicki, Roosalu, and Senčar, "Precarious Work"; Kretsos, "Union Responses"; Gumbrell-McCormick, "European Trade Unions"; Thornley, Jefferys, and Appay, *Globalization and Precarious Forms*; and Heery, "Trade Unions and Contingent Labour."

4. For instance, vol. 24, issue 22, *International Journal of HRM;* International Sociological Association 2012, 2014.

5. Schurman and Eaton, "Trade Union Organizing in the Informal."

6. Global Labour History has powerfully criticized the Euro-centric focus of traditional labour history research. Included in this criticism is the Western conceptualization of all labour as wage labour. The opening of labour history to the study of other types of work relations is fundamental to understand current and historical dynamics of labour exploitation within capitalism. However, the analysis of workers' collective organizations continues to be focused, to a large extend, on trade unions, that is, on the institutional form of wage workers' resistance. This is indicative of the limits of institutionalism also in an historical perspective.

7. Darlington, "The role of Trade Unions," 114.

8. Simms and Charlwood, "Trade Unions: Power and Influence."

9. Jenkins, "Organizing Spaces of Hope"; Gunawardana, "Reframing Employee Voice"; Rizzo, "Informalisation and the End of Trade Unionism"; Agarwala, *Informal Labor, Formal Politics*; Lazar, "A Desire to Formalize"; De la Garza, *Trabajo no clásico*; Taylor et al., "Indian Call Centres"; Chun, *Organising at the Margins*; Pangsapa, *Textures of Struggle*; and Ngai, *Made in China*.

10. Sassen, "Informalization: Imported or a Feature?"

11. Atzeni and Ghigliani, "The Re-emergence of Workplace"; and Atzeni and Ghigliani, "Pragmatism, Ideology or Politics?".

12. Wilkinson et al., *Handbook of Research on Employees Voice*.

13. Simms, Holgate, and Heery, *Union Voices – Tactics and Tensions*; and Gall, *The Future of Union Organizing*.

14. Fairbrother, "Social Movement Unionism."

15. Kelly and Willman, *Union Organization and Activity*.

16. Hyman, *Understanding European Trade Unionism*.

17. Offe and Wiesenthal, "Two Logics of Collective Action."

18. Jenkins, "Organizing Spaces of Hope"; Mc Bride and Greenwood, *Community Unionism*; and Fine, *Workers Centers: Organizing Communities*.

19. Van der Linden, *Workers of the World*.

20. Cohen, *Ramparts of Resistance;* and Hyman, *Industrial Relations a Marxist Introduction*.

21. Fox Piven and Cloward, *Poor People's Movements*.

22. Hobsbawm, *Worlds of Labour*, 291.

23. Atzeni, *Alternative Work Organizations*; and Azzellini and Ness, *Ours to Own*.

24. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak*.

25. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*. 'Experiences' of common exploitation are, for Thompson, fundamental in the 'historical making' of the working class.

26. Silver, *Forces of Labor*.

27. Fox Piven, "Power from Below," 5.

28. Holloway, *Crack Capitalism*.

29. Belanger and Edwards, "Conflict and Contestation"; and Belanger and Edwards, "The Conditions Promoting Compromise."

30. I am considering here technology as a relative rather than absolute factor.

31. Silver, *Forces of Labor*.

32. Olin Wright, "Working Class Power."

33. Silver, *Forces of Labor*, 106–113.

34. Wills et al., *Global Cities at Work*.

35. Macbride and Greenwood, *Community Unionism*.

36. Fine, *Workers Centers: Organizing Communities*.

37. Jenkins, "Organizing Spaces of Hope."
38. Fox Piven and Cloward, *Poor People's Movements*.
39. Fox Piven and Cloward, *Poor People's Movements,* 36.
40. Fox Piven and Cloward, *Poor People's Movements,* 23.
41. Coe and Jordhus-Lier, "Constrained Agency," 218.
42. Chun, *Organizing at the Margins.*
43. Fine, "Community Unions".
44. Agarwala, *Informal Labor, Formal Politics.*
45. For readers alien to Argentine politics, Peronism might be seen as the Argentinean form of fordism/welfare state.
46. Atzeni and Ghigliani, "Labour Movement in Argentina."
47. Atzeni and Ghigliani, "The Re-emergence of Workplace."
48. Taller de Relaciones Laborales, *Informe de estadísticas laborales*.
49. Bertranou et al., "Informality and Employment Quality in Argentina."
50. Sassen, "Informalization: Imported or a Feature?"
51. The CGT is the main trade union confederation of Peronist tendencies which, at that time, fully supported the government.
52. Here, reference to skills is not in terms of values (all workers are skilled, each in their jobs) but in relation to how many people have certain types of skills in the context of labour market competition.

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