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To cite this article: Álvaro Del Águila (2016): The hummingbird and the bricks: re-creation of ethnicity among Paraguayan workers in the construction industry of Buenos Aires, Latin American and Caribbean Ethnic Studies, DOI: [10.1080/17442222.2016.1170952](https://doi.org/10.1080/17442222.2016.1170952)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17442222.2016.1170952>



Published online: 12 Apr 2016.



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The hummingbird and the bricks: re-creation of ethnicity among Paraguayan workers in the construction industry of Buenos Aires

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ABSTRACT

This article aims to analyze the experiences of Paraguayan immigrants who work in the construction industry of Buenos Aires, Argentina. It begins by exploring the main approaches linking ethnicity and construction labor, challenging the widely held view that job placement in construction sites allows upward mobility among immigrants. The author argues instead that the broader process of Paraguayan workers migration (from rural or semi-urban areas) and their subsequent job placement in the construction industry of Buenos Aires are part and expression of a single process of creation of a subaltern workforce that provides cheap labor to the Argentinian labor market. Arising from an ethnographic approach in different construction sites, this research shows how the predominantly rural origin of immigrants is considered by the employers as a 'cultural legitimacy' of their subordinate role in the production process. To demonstrate this, the author focuses on how Guaraní language participates in the re-creation of interethnic boundaries in the sites. Based on data arising from participant-observation and in-depth interviewing, the author argues that certain ethnic characteristics that employers attribute to immigrant workers (particularly, from their use of an indigenous language) help explain the overexploitation of their labor and the hindering of their upward mobility.

KEYWORDS

Argentina; construction industry; ethnicity; Guaraní language; immigration; Paraguay

Introduction

This article analyzes the relation between ethnic differentiation and job placement in the construction industry in Buenos Aires, Argentina. Given the discourses that relate the ethnicization of workplaces to the presence of Paraguayan immigrants, this article first asks how the ethnic distinctions are constructed and negotiated within the construction industry: Do migrants adapt their identities to the industry or do they define their

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In the Guaraní Mbya mythology, the hummingbird represents the primeval bird. The hummingbird accompanies 'Ñamandú,' father creator of the world, in his first trip through Paradise. Cadogan ([1959] 1997), a widely renowned Paraguayan ethnologist, transcribed the myth of origin for the Guaraní: 'While our first Father created in the course of its evolution, its divine body, the hummingbird existed among the primeval winds. Before Ñamandú conceived his future earthly dwelling, before he conceived future firmament, future land ... Hummingbird cooled his path.'

identity and therefore the ethnic landscape? Second, the research analyzes the underlying reasons why, in construction sites, some ethnicities are related to certain jobs (manual workers) and not others (engineers and architects). In this connection, the article proposes an alternative reading to the one that affirms the upward social mobility of migrants in the construction industry. By analyzing the case of Paraguayan workers in the construction industry of Buenos Aires, we will argue that, for the Argentine employers, consideration of Paraguayans as 'ethnically different' serves to legitimize their overexploitation.

This research is located at the intersection of three broad categories of analysis: ethnicity, migration, and labor. On a theoretical level, this research aims to contribute to the understanding of the complex relations between the processes of ethnic segmentation and capitalist accumulation. It retrieves the researches of several authors who argued that capitalist globalization leads to ethnic differentiation in the world of work (Castells 1999; Harvey 2003; Wallman 1979; Wolf 1982). In this vein, we consider that current workplaces must be thought as interethnic spaces, characterized by tensions and conflicts arising from the confluence of diverse views on ways and labor purposes (Harvey 2003; Silver 2006). By focusing on the construction industry, we intend to develop a privileged look over some of these processes, given the fact that the worldwide construction industry represents an occupational sector that manages to gather workforce from various national origins. We also believe that an ethnographic approach to the construction industry may become particularly relevant. And that is because common perceptions of the industry might be challenged through an 'attentive focus on local contexts, practices, and differences that ethnographic research brings to the fore' (Pink, Tutt, and Dainty 2013, 3).

In the following sections, we will give a brief overview of the main approaches linking ethnicity and class, with an emphasis on theoretical models that have considered the ethnic segmentation of the labor market. In order to analyze the phenomenon of ethnic re-creation, we have described the main characteristics that the construction industry adopts in Argentina, focusing on the particular case of the use of the Guaraní language by Paraguayan immigrant workers in the construction sites of Buenos Aires. Finally, we have outlined some reflections that serve to open up lines of inquiry for the future.

The ethnically segmented labor markets and the ethnic segmentation of the workplace

Based on the original proposals of Barth, ethnic groups can be thought as 'categories of ascription and identification that are used by the actors themselves and have, therefore, the characteristic of organizing interaction among individuals' ([1969] 1976, 10). Thus, an ethnic group 'is formed around a distinct and contrastive identity, defined as a system of social relations between group members and those who are not members of the group' (Bonfill Batalla 1982, 36). In this sense, Barth showed ethnicity 'as a subjective and variable identification process through which a social group uses ethnic labels to define itself in contrast to other social groups' (Hidalgo 1992, 9). By emphasizing the dynamics of identification, Barth rejected the anthropological notion of culture as a bounded entity and ethnicity as generating primordial ties, replacing them with a vision focused on the interrelationship between the clusters.

In Latin America, Barth's ideas were revised in light of the great social movements of the 20th century, leading to major conceptual advances. We highlight in this sense the importance of the contributions of Díaz Polanco (1988) in relation to the debate about the distinctions between ethnicity, class, and nationality. First, the author states that, in class systems, 'ethnicity should be considered as a dimension of classes, or as a level of them' (62). From this perspective, Díaz Polanco's approach represents a significant improvement over Barth's original position, in the sense that for the latter, ethnic boundaries would be modified through symmetrical interactions between the ethnic groups.

But Díaz Polanco's approach is also illuminating in other senses. From an epistemological point of view, by proposing an approach that addresses the relationship between ethnicity and social class:

We must consider class structure in order to understand the nature and reproduction of ethnic complexity, postulating that the cultural and social phenomenon that implies the latter is determined by class structure; not in the sense that the former produces the latter, but in the sense that, in its transformations, we can find the key to the constitution and reproduction of the other. (Díaz Polanco 1988, 64)¹

This approach helps to understand that every social group develops an ethnic dimension. In this sense, the act of referring to some groups as 'ethnic' and not to others groups as such conceals other processes clearly beyond the objective characteristics of group decisions. While these processes are usually presented like the product of internal configurations, the fact remains is that there are social forces that contribute to the 'ethnicization' of certain social groups and not of others.

This view is consistent with what Wolf (1982) pointed out in relation to cultural processes. According to the author, instead of talking about 'a' culture, we must talk about 'a series of processes that construct, reconstruct, and dismantle cultural materials, responding to well identified determinants' (468). In this sense, one of the complementary dimensions of the capitalist transformation/expansion 'is the result of ongoing ethnic fragmentation and subsequent rearrangements' (Regalsky 2003, 18). Thus, ethnic difference and inequality among ethnic groups are closely related to class struggle in specific historical moments (Comaroff and Comaroff 1992).²

In this vein, Regalsky (2003) showed that the appearance on scene of 'new ethnic groups' usually has to do with the economic and political process of establishing new forms of domination. Following his proposal, we argue here that it is necessary to think ethnicity as a process of 'politicization of cultural differences' (77) rather than as a series of specific and clustering characteristics. Thus, these differences (on which ethnicity stands) are mainly interpreted as such regarding specific purposes and contexts. As Fenton (1999) pointed out, the main matter is to identify historical processes and contexts producers of varying forms of ethnicity or, in other words, 'varied practices of ethnicization and racialization of collectives which generate *sui generis* forms of inequality' (56).

Regarding the implications of this for the field of labor, these processes seem to result in a non-homogeneous, but 'segmented' or 'differentiated' labor market. According to Wolf (1982), this happens because every mode of production 're-creates the basic relationship between capital and labor' (459–460). By doing this, it also re-creates the

heterogeneity of the labor force, 'hierarchically ordering groups and categories of workers, and continuously and symbolically re-creating cultural distinctions' (460).

Focusing on the ethnicity-labor ratio, a rough distinction could be operated between those approaches that have addressed the ethnicity-labor ratio as a result of the identifying phenomena that occur because of socially shared labor among symbolic subjects, and those who have conceived the world of work as fundamentally created and sustained by preexistent ethnic relationships. On the one hand, those authors who emphasize ethnicity as the symbolic and material product of shared work understand ethnicity as a product or as a necessary implication of human groupings, in this case, related to the daily fact that individuals share the same workplace and certain relations of production. Authors who have developed this approach are Bourgois (1989) and Fenton (1999).

On the other hand, we find those who have emphasized the role that ethnicity has an enabling job placement because of ethnic membership. A peculiarity of this emphasis lies in understanding *ethnicity as a resource* for actors to access labor, stating that this is the main reason why 'ethnicized labor niches' arise. Representatives of this analysis are Maguid (2001) and Vargas (2005).

Only a few authors (Bonacich 1972; Wallman 1979) have attempted to synthesize the two approaches by proposing that 'work systems can be created or maintained by ethnicity, while ethnicity may also be a product of the structure of labor' (Wallman 1979, 6). Our approach will seek to locate at the confluence of these two dimensions of analysis to address the plight of Paraguayan workers in the construction industry of Buenos Aires. Being a case in which ethnicity acquires specific dimensions in relation to the dominant mode of surplus extraction, the notions of 'segmented market' (Wolf 1982) and 'contexts of ethnic production' (Fenton 1999) will be extremely useful for us. As Fenton (2010, 187) suggested, it is not possible to elaborate a simple theory of ethnicity but rather a sociological search for ethnic contexts. We will try to show that the construction sites in Buenos Aires are privileged spaces for understanding certain ethnic demarcation processes.

Before closing this section, it is necessary to define the meaning we will give to the category of social class in the context of this research. Paraphrasing Giddens (2000), there has been some reluctance in investigating social classes' dynamics in specific workplaces, especially due to the fact that in undertaking this task the researcher is inevitably mired in controversy regarding the best way to approach the issue, given the fact that a study in this field can only refer to a small selection of the almost endless bibliography on the subject.

Following Briceño-León's proposal (1992), we will limit our analysis of class dynamics to some fundamental sociological indicators, used as tools to facilitate the development of the ethnographic analysis. These indicators are: (1) manual/intellectual type of work; (2) ownership/no possession of the means of production; (3) control/no control of the production process; and (4) global function that is fulfilled (capital or labor).³

Therefore, class will not be considered here as a preexisting data, but as derived from the description of the work performed by individuals in the specific work units. From a methodological point of view, this framework demands that the researcher goes to the workplace, observes, and records in person how social work is organized and

distributed, and paying attention to the particular ways in which labor and ethnicity are linked and juxtaposed in construction sites.

'Being there:' ethnographic epistemology and research methods

As in any ethnographic research, our previous experience became an important source of knowledge, among other things, about the limits of our own conclusions. First, it is important to say that we have worked on construction sites throughout more than a decade, as Occupational Safety and Health professionals. In this vein, arguably we first acted as *participants* and then became *participant observers*. In this sense, from a methodological point of view, it must be said that the role of the researcher did not correspond to what is commonly considered the 'canonical' way to access the field. The kind of identity we brought to the sites (and how the builders identified us) provided a framework and a guide to the kind of information we acquired (Reinhartz 1997).⁴

We believe that this situation both positively (resulting in a 'privileged' participant observation) and negatively influenced the willingness of subjects to participate in the research as respondents. From the introduction of *reflexivity* in the field (Guber 1999), we sought to develop a permanent attitude of 'epistemological vigilance' (Bourdieu 1993) that would meet the conditions in which the interviewee and us produced research. In this sense, the interviewing process required a special effort to capture and interpret the relationship between the interviewees and ourself, given that asymmetry was legitimized in advance, through its objectification in our different roles in the production process.

Therefore, we would like to make clear that the kind of discourse produced by subjects during interviews was interpreted by us as 'extraordinary', in the sense that it could have never been produced beyond the inevitable contextual conditions of the particular communicative situation. Nevertheless, we consider these discourses are invaluable tools to capture how the actors perceive certain social processes.

With regard to the construction of the sample of construction sites, the criterion used consisted in performing fieldwork in those sites in which the majority of the workforce came from Paraguay. Between 2006 and 2014, we developed participant – observation in 30 sites that met those requirements, which were located in different geographical areas of Buenos Aires (Figure 1).⁵

Regarding the informants, the selection criteria implemented are more difficult to explain because they are inherent to fieldwork. In this sense, there were several reasons why a 'potential informant' effectively became a 'real informant.' I conducted 27 semi-structured interviews (with a guide questionnaire) and about 60 'informal chats,' which were not recorded but reconstructed based on the notes taken. The ethnographic relationship reflected in the interviews and presented here involved people with very different backgrounds as regards political participation, experience in the host society, previous jobs, age, how long they had been living in Buenos Aires, etc.⁶

Finally, the research presented below shows other peculiarities arising from the approach itself and the potential scope of ethnographic generalization. An almost obvious limitation of what we will argue here has to do with the fact that not every Paraguayan man who migrates to Buenos Aires gets a job in the construction industry. At the same time, it is not true that all Paraguayan workers in the construction industry



Figure 1. Workers during a collective interview.

come from rural areas. However, as we will try to show throughout the article, the presence in the construction sector of Buenos Aires of immigrants from rural areas of Paraguay is highly significant compared to that of other immigrants and that is why it becomes a relevant inquiry.

Social mobility in the Argentinian construction industry

According to the International Labor Organization, in 1998 there were over 111 million construction workers worldwide, and most of them came from low- and middle-income countries (ILO 2001, 2014). At the same time, the distribution of employment in the construction industry was almost exactly reverse to the distribution of production: high-income countries generated 77 per cent of global production of the construction industry with 26 per cent of total employment. The rest of the world (low- and middle-income countries) amounted to only 23 per cent of world production but 74 per cent of total employment (2001, 7). More recent data shows that global investment in the construction grew to US\$ 4.2 billion, representing nearly 10 per cent of global GDP in 2005 (CAC 2009). In this context, Latin America accounts for 9.1 per cent of world market construction, with investments amounting to US\$ 386,000 million. Brazil appears as the largest market in the region, while Argentina represents 6.4 per cent of the market in the region and 0.6 per cent of world trade (Ruggirello 2011).

At present, construction workers account for between 5 and 10 per cent of the total labor market in almost every country (Thiel 2012, 3). Despite this, we still know little about the way they live their working life. Different authors (Pink, Tutt, and Dainty 2013; Pink et al. 2010) have attributed this situation to certain characteristics that make the construction industry extremely difficult to analyze. This has to do with an internal complexity (as it involves many different tasks such as design, construction, and maintenance services) that makes it a sector in which different types of work and trades are conjugated. This situation has led some authors to argue that any comprehensive analysis of the industry must consider it as a related but relatively heterogeneous

subindustries set (Chan and Räisänen 2009; Pink et al. 2010) characterized by a 'structural fragmentation' (Pink, Tutt, and Dainty 2013, 2) with respect to models of work and organization.

Despite the significant proliferation of studies that have analyzed the building industry elsewhere (Applebaum 1981; Chan and Räisänen 2009; Cremers and Janssen 2006) and workers who work in the sites as labor (Chan, Clarke, and Dainty 2010; Ness 2011), it can be said that little has been studied from Argentina so far. Although there are some studies that have analyzed the presence of immigrant workers in the industry (Aruj 2012; Aruj and Di Santo 2002), they have focused on the more general characteristics of the matter, mainly in how the presence of immigrant labor impacts the Argentine labor market. An exception to the above is the work of Panaia (1985, 1990, 1995) who has devoted years to the subject, and whose analysis will be invaluable for our approach.

Panaia defined the construction industry as a traditional, almost artisan sector, 'where different factors contribute to blocking modernization, as the weight of the State-employer, public investment policy, and the move away from traditional technological frontiers' (1990, 135). At the time of her research, the author noted that the sector lacked 'fit and proper credit instruments' to carry out the projects, as a consequence it was chronically affected by severe restrictions on its real growth. These features, according to Panaia, would be central and would have given specific character to activity, configuring it as a sector subject to pronounced cycles, exposed to economical crisis, and highly prone to specific structuring of the labor market settings and the hiring policies (1990).

A central point in her analysis has to do with the way in which the Argentinian construction industry manages to overcome cyclical financial obstacles. Faced with the evidence of the remarkable growth in activity during the 1980s, the author argues that this can only be explained by an increase in undeclared construction activities 'beyond the official registrations and legal mechanisms for hiring labor' (Panaia 1990, 137).

To fully understand the relationship that links the industry with migratory flows coming from Paraguay, I will refer to the analysis of Bruno (2008), who estimated that the employment of 4 in 10 Paraguayan men workers who migrate to Argentina takes place in the construction industry of Buenos Aires. This situation is of great significance when contrasted with the native participation in the sector. According to Bruno, only 1 in 10 native Argentinians work on a construction site.⁷

According to Maguid (2001), the trend of cross-border immigrants that become part of the construction industry starts to be noticed in the 1960s. From the author's point of view, the phenomenon would have responded to a process of 'selective integration' of immigrants in a flexible and disadvantageous market in terms of wages and conditions of employment (14). However, a more recent ethnographic approach (Vargas 2005) downplays in part the scope of selective job placement of immigrants in the worst paid, less skilled, and more vulnerable jobs in the industry. Vargas understood that, in recent years, such selective job placement would have begun to give rise to a 'process of vertical ethno-national segmentation' (27), whereby workers from the neighboring countries no longer would cover only the lowest occupational strata of a work but, increasingly, all hierarchies (Figure 2).

Despite this statement by Vargas, as we argued on other occasions (Del Águila 2009), fieldwork showed that, in general, upward mobility is extremely rare among Paraguayan workers. By saying this, we are not denying the existence of senior positions that are

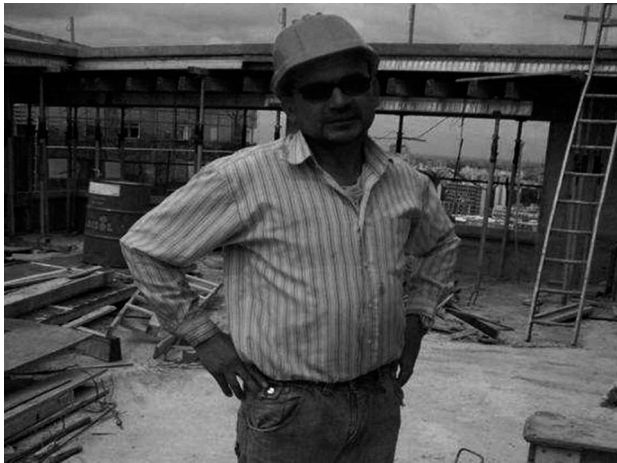


Figure 2. Paraguayan contractor.

currently held by border immigrants in the industry. However, it is true that these 'better-paid positions' are only held by a very small number of immigrants. The evidence of an industry where there are immigrants in foremen positions or as contractors, as demonstrated in this study, speaks of a specialization that they developed through their work experience in Argentina, but this does not mean effective upward social mobility. In other words, the Argentine employers may have chosen to 'paraguayize' certain decision-making positions, but this does not necessarily imply upward mobility for the collective of workers. Conversely, as we will try to show, 'paraguayization' of some decision-making roles seem an effective strategy that the employer uses to better ensure compliance of the work process. But we will get to this point later.

Based on the four indicators proposed by Briceño-León (1992), to analyze the dynamics of social classes in the workplace (manual work vs. intellectual work; possession vs. non-possession of the means of production, control vs. no control of the productive process, capital contributions vs. workforce contribution), it is evident for any observer that there exist specific differences among the people that work in the sites. Class differences (as an ethnographically documentable reality) are overall visible and fundamentally built on the distinction between manual vs. intellectual work.

In worksites, builders will be identified almost exclusively with the deployment of manual and physical skills. In this sense, any other competence or technical knowledge of the workers will be practically invisible to the eyes of those who are not builders. In opposition to this, only engineers and architects perform intellectual work, mainly in logistics, blueprints reading, and coordination of materials delivery. They usually visit the site and walk around it once or twice a day, in order to verify specific issues and check progress and inspect the work. They also spend time in a place usually known as the 'workroom,' where computers, printers, telephones, etc. are located, and where there are usually fans or air conditioning as well. There, they plan and coordinate site operation. This differentiation of workspaces is evident and recognized by all, and the material and symbolical differences between 'the workroom' and 'the site' are notorious (clean vs. dirt, order vs. disorder, shelter vs. unshelter, etc.).

Between these two poles embodied by engineers and builders, there are two other typical roles around production. First, we find the ‘contractors,’ who do not perform manual work and basically provide the means of production that are used by the builders to produce. Their fundamental role is to maintain a network of contacts with different construction companies to guarantee the continuity of work. Since, in general, contractors serve in various sites simultaneously, they can only spend a small part of the day in each one. The rest of the time they often leave a foreman in charge at each site.

The role of the ‘foreman’ is essentially to act as a liason between the engineers and the workers. A central feature of the foremen is that, in all cases, they have been builders themselves in the past. Their case represents what can be understood as ‘upward mobility within the industry’ and shows what I have interpreted in terms of ‘paraguayanaization’ of hierarchical roles and functions. Their main role will be to ‘translate’ into action the instructions given by the site manager (engineer), managing and directing the workers’ production.

In analytical terms, the foreman must be able to combine different logics and negotiate (with builders, contractors, and foremen), explaining to the builders the instructions given by architects and engineers, in order to achieve the completion of tasks that were previously represented only as potential processes in architectural plans. Since their main task is to ‘act as a liason’ and ‘explain/translate,’ as we have conceptualized it, they will need to develop a certain ‘cultural flexibility’ in order to be understood by all the individuals involved.

A major issue has to do with the fact that the foreman is basically an employee who collects a stipulated salary in exchange for a fortnight production. He is not an employer but an employee. On the contrary, as the name implies, the contractor is an employer. He has a direct interest in costs and production time. The contractor provides builders and arranges with engineers the completion of a given task at a scheduled time and for a certain amount of money. In this regard, if the task is completed earlier than agreed, constructors can save wages costs. Conversely, if the opposite happens, they may suffer losses.

Even though it is difficult, a few Paraguayan builders manage to become foremen (and even contractors) in the sites in Buenos Aires. However, it is almost impossible for a Paraguayan worker to become a site manager (engineer or architect). The social relationship that links engineers and builders is characterized by the absolute impossibility of one becoming the other. This relationship is based on a ‘radical Otherness’ between subjects and roles. My fieldwork has shown that it is almost impossible for a Bolivian or a Paraguayan immigrant to work as an architect or engineer in the sites in Buenos Aires. Being Paraguayan always implies (at least, in construction sites in Buenos Aires) being a builder, a foreman or, in the best-case scenario, a contractor. Undoubtedly, this impossibility exists because of the deep historical and social structurations and barriers due to which, in Buenos Aires, engineers and architects often belong to the middle or upper classes and are ‘socially white.’

In this sense, for the engineers, the Paraguayans will present a more stigmatized subgroup within the category of builders (Pizarro 2009). In Argentina, there is a word for this: ‘negro’ (meaning ‘black people,’ not phenotypically but socially speaking). The nature of this ‘negritude’ implies the absolute impossibility of being an engineer or architect. That is why the professions within the construction industry speak about the

social place of the individuals, even more than about their technical competence. While a 'negro' contractor can earn much more money than an architect employed by a construction company, a 'negro' can never be in charge of the production process. The direction of the work can only rest on a 'native and socially white person.' In other words, Paraguayans do not cease to be 'negro' simply by making money. The only possible way for a Paraguayan to become a site manager would be through 'social whitening' and this can only be achieved by studying Engineering or Architecture. This is the main reason why the upward social mobility of immigrants from neighboring countries cannot be taken for granted. We will discuss this in more detail in the following sections.

The process of proletarianization of Paraguayan rural workers in the construction industry

We will begin by considering that the labor force provided by the Paraguayan workers represents a workforce liable to be exploited in a particular way by construction employers. A first dimension to consider with respect to this operation is one that, on other occasions, we have chosen to conceptualize as 'ethnic proletarianization process' (Del Águila 2009). The concept seeks to describe the process by which the Paraguayan worker from rural economies (or small towns) delivers his workforce in exchange for a wage. The particularity of the phenomenon is linked to the 'metamorphosis' experienced by the subject (rural/urban; self-subsistence/wage). This proletarianization happens outside of Paraguay, fueled by labor demand from Argentina. It is through this mechanism that the Argentine capitalism exploits a workforce that has not been 'raised' under their relations of production, saving the costs involved in the reproduction of that workforce since childhood. This process takes place, among other possible scenarios, within the building industry of Buenos Aires.

According to Meillasoux (1972), the net gains of such situations for the capitalist sector has to do with the use (exploitation) of the product of the mechanisms of social reproduction in the domestic sphere of subsistence-orientated areas. Thus, what the construction business reinforces is a mode of production that still exists in the Paraguayan countryside as creator of cheap workforce, as a *reserve army of labor* that can be compelled to migrate when market forces require it. That is why, as Meillasoux suggested, through the exploitation of the immigrant workforce, 'what actually takes place is a process of exploitation of the domestic community that nurtured its workforce' (1972, 89).

Another dimension that shapes the vulnerability of immigrant workers has to do with the productive process itself. The production process in a site usually requires 'free' workforce in the sense that it is preferable that the worker does not have any social ties (which may lead to family or educational leaves) and, given the urgency to complete a task, not being 'free' may prove to be an obstacle in relation to the job requirements. This is due to the particular characteristics of the development of the organization of the production process in the construction sector where it is extremely usual for workers to work overtime, either because the 'concrete filling' of a slab cannot be interrupted (since the material will spoil if not filled on time), or because a truck with materials is delayed and they have to download it, among other possible situations. Therefore, it can be

assumed that a young newcomer immigrant, who does not have any family obligations yet nor commitments to attend to, is better able to respond effectively to these requirements than a native worker of the same age. In the interviews with young immigrants, these situations of overextension of the working day usually appear as 'desirable' because of certain primacy of the 'wage fetishism' (Ribeiro 2006, 99) assumed as an 'opportunity to work some more hours and earn more money.' Needless is to say that, for the employer, it is undoubtedly more profitable to extend the working hours of the same worker rather than to hire additional workers to cover the remaining work:

People who came from Asunción did not look for a job in construction. They usually get a job in other trades such as upholstery or shoe making. In the sites here [in Buenos Aires], contractors tell people in the Paraguayan countryside to come to work in the sites, that they will pay them fifteen pesos [the equivalent of US\$ 18 dollars] per day in Guaranies [Paraguayan currency], and will provide them food and accommodation [on the same sites]. After that, they give them a thin mattress as paper and go to the supermarket and buy them those bones, those that people buy for dogs, which nobody wants, and that is what they give them. (Interview conducted to Paraguayan contractor Benitez, September 2008)

In these circumstances, the absence of the domestic sphere as a sphere of social reproduction of the labor force is used by the employers to dispose more effectively of workforce. A concrete example of this is the housing of workers in the sites, a fact that, as shown by Ribeiro (2006), implies an extension of the employer's logic, by organizing and subordinating the free time (or the moment of the workforce reproduction) of workers to the production sphere. Why is this possible in the case of Paraguayan migrants?

The hummingbird and the bricks: does ethnicity migrate with people?

Buenos Aires' labor market differs significantly from the ones that prevail in the places of origin of immigrants.⁸ While, of course, there are segmentation processes in rural and semi-urban markets, they are based on principles that differ from the ones in Buenos Aires.⁹

Anthropology made numerous contributions to the analysis of agricultural economics, both from Argentina (Abduca 1993; Archetti 1993; Balazote 2007; among others) and from other latitudes (Chayanov 1966; Godelier 1978; Meillasoux 1972; Sahlins 1972; Wolf 1982; among many others). Nevertheless, my only interest in the issue lies in the fact that, as different authors (Harvey 2003; Meillasoux 1972) demonstrated, capitalism needs the sustenance of non-capitalist institutions and worldviews to ensure the reproduction of the labor force. As Harvey notes,

The process of proletarianization, for example, involves a combination of coercion and appropriation of skills, knowledge, beliefs, habits of thought and pre-capitalist social relations of those being proletarianized. The following also play a role: kinship structures, organizational models of family and household structures and gender relations and authority (including the one exercised through religion and its institutions). In certain cases, the existing structures must be violently repressed, but numerous studies show that capitalism also tries to integrate them in order to reach some consensus rather than using pure coercion to constitute the working class. (2003, 117)

Although classical economy often argued that the engine of economic behavior is given by the principle of optimization and pursuit of maximum benefit, social relationships that small Paraguayan producers build are far from being limited to that. What should be highlighted here is that the only way to fully understand the economic rationality that prevails among workers is understanding that the economic status does not only speak of wealth/poverty in absolute terms but also, and more centrally, of the effective membership to a moral community (Thompson 1979). Marx ([1867] 1947) and Polanyi (1968) have already addressed similar issues regarding how economic practices overlap with social organization.

We must not forget that for these communities 'to produce' basically implies 'to produce among us.' This relates to the fact that in these locations the labor that is usually considered 'ideal' is the one that takes place within the domestic group (Chayanov 1966; Comas D' Argemir 1995). So, in these contexts,

Being *mboriahu* (which means 'poor' in Guaraní language) is defined as a social rather than as an economic condition: if someone shares the same social conditions as the people who surround him, even though he may have a higher income than the rest, he will be considered 'poor.' In contrast, the 'rich people' are not the ones that make more money but the ones who disown their *mboriahu* condition because they do not share that condition socially speaking. (Ortiz Sandoval 2007, 749)

But there are ways in which the category of 'we' among small producers can also be observed through other behaviors. Within structured communities, 'favors' represent a symbolic good that becomes extremely important. I refer to reciprocal job aids and entrenched economic production mechanisms that do not correspond to the prototypical capitalist behavior. Thus, on the basis of shared social conditions of production, and the common experience against adversity, members build a strong sense of 'ethnic-we.' In other words, the production conditions to which they are exposed to as small producers, and as 'poor' represent the material basis on which ethnicity and the sense of belonging to the group stands. And from this, 'trust' becomes a fundamental value among them, in our opinion, to the point of being considered as a condition for membership (Del Águila 2014a).

Going back to Panaia (1990, 139), the construction industry is characterized by requiring a relatively high margin of autonomy on the part of the workers so that the process of group work can be integrated and functions as a team that economizes time. According to the author, this principle of autonomy is essential to the variable production, because,

It is opposed to the time control economy that requires a detailed prescription of the task, and especially the duration of its execution. Here the team performance depends on the overall operation and not on the sum of individual performances. Hence, the market value of a worker depends not only on his skill and expertise, but also on his ability as regards group integration. (Panaia 1990, 139)

This feature of the sector partly explains the importance of the formation of 'crews' in the industry, and why employers generally encourage the organization of work around patterns based in confidence (which usually are stronger when they rely on ethnic, family, or peasantry ties). The same can explain the 'paraguayization' of foremen and contractors' roles. As Panaia (1990) noted, in this model of work organization, notions of

'collective worker' and 'collective rating' are very important. In this sense, it can be considered that there is an additional factor of production that is used by the employers, and that is the one that links the workers to each other, organizing and encouraging trust for the benefit of the production process.

To clarify our argument, we will refer to the analysis by Vargas (2005) regarding the modalities that ethnic demarcation processes acquire within a construction site. The author states that,

The construction industry produces nationality as a form of expression of ethnic identity, i.e., as a way of organizing the differences through the attachment to values and practices deemed essential that, updated in the construction site context, contribute to the maintenance of a specific form of domination and exploitation. (Vargas 2005, 104)

Thus, the human ability to create symbolic and material ties through ethnicity is harnessed and organized for the benefit of the production process. In this kind of grouping, among other things, it is common for a worker to help another if there is an emergency requiring that he can be absent from work. In other words, a group of workers ethnically bonded is generally more capable of responding to the demands of the production process than a number of individuals who do not relate to each other. In this sense, continuing with the ideas of Wolf (1982) and Fenton (1999), we propose to consider workers' ethnicity as a component of the surplus value that is extracted from their work, as a dimension of their workforce that is functional to the accumulation process.

Despite the above, it cannot be said that what is exploited in the construction industry is simply a 'peasant ethnicity' or a 'rural worldview' of workers. The other dimension of the problem lies in the fact that the ethnicity of Paraguayan immigrants is actually an 'invention' of the employer sector. In other words, certain class dispositions (manual work, incipient proletarianization, lack of knowledge about labor and union rights, the absence of the domestic sphere) will be interpreted by the employer in 'ethnic terms.' Thus, employers will tend to essentialize the class dispositions of workers considering that the acceptance of the harsh conditions of work is part of the 'Paraguayan nature.'¹⁰

Through it, certain labor and social skills would be imagined by employers as 'essences' shared by the workers for the sake of being Paraguayan. Suffice it to say that even when migration networks often rely on the peasantry, neighborhood, or kinship, in a lot of cases, immigrant workers meet for the first time in a site. In this sense, the projected ethnicity on them, among other issues, does not consider demarcation practices that distinguish the Paraguayan one from the other, such as the provenance of various departments of Paraguay.

To try to demonstrate the complexity of these matters, we will now present some reflections upon the use of the Guaraní language by workers, and how it participates significantly in these processes of interethnic demarcation taking place in construction sites. Our interest in the matter has to do with the fact that Paraguayan rural workers use this indigenous language (which is also, an official language in Paraguay) to communicate with each other. In the sites in Buenos Aires, Guaraní language would be understood by Argentine employers as 'evidence of indianness' and, with this, as a legitimation for subalternity of Paraguayans workers.¹¹

Reflections upon the use of Guarani language in the construction industry in Buenos Aires

The fact that someone speaks Spanish in a site in Buenos Aires does not show a priori whether this person is an engineer, an investor, a foreman, or a builder. So, leaving aside their sociolinguistic variants for a moment, Spanish cannot be associated with any specific group in terms of class, ethnicity, or hierarchy. This is not the case with unofficial ('non-hegemonic') languages. Guarani is basically a mark of subordination of its speakers. However, it is not simply a brand: The Guarani language not only expresses the stigma attached to those who speak that language but *it is the stigma itself* and, in this sense, it cannot be separated from the person using it. This is why it will not be possible for its speakers to abandon it, independently from any kind of process they may experience in terms of upward mobility.

We do experience racial discrimination because we are Creoles in the same way Argentinians are, we are of European descent. Unless you hear a Paraguayan talk, it will be hard for you to realize that he is Paraguayan. (Interview with Arsenio, Paraguayan laborer, February 2011)

A first distinction has to do with the situations in which the Guarani language usually appears. Generally, it appears when the *Other* (native speaker and not Guarani speaker, is almost always in a higher position in the occupational hierarchy) is temporarily absent. In this sense, the use of Guarani seems to have a role, at least in principle, in the demarcation of 'cultural difference' as such, in the sense that it is not possible to communicate or socialize with some people in that language. By contrast, the Guarani language is used fluently by workers who do understand it. In this sense, the use of the Guarani language does not seem to be an 'alternative' way of communication to Spanish (which in principle, the speaker could choose), but it would also be central to report on the construction of a symbolic process of interpretation of certain differences between people. From the above, it is possible to highlight as a first dimension of the use of the language of origin, that by which it appears to contribute to the process of demarcation that distinguishes between those who are able to understand Guarani (and therefore, are members of a group) and those who cannot (and therefore, are 'outsiders').

As shown in other cases, the use of the mother tongue is often strongly related to the 'transmission of cultural contents, knowledge, values, habits, attitudes, norms and customs from generation to generation' (Hecht 2011, 47), not only in a nuclear family but also within what could be considered a little 'ethno-working group.' In this sense, much of what a rural worker learns about the art of building is transmitted by most experienced fellows on the sites. Overall, the fieldwork revealed that an important part of this process of 'socialization in the art' is transmitted in Guarani language. According to the author,

Language can be considered both as a means to become a responsible member of the community, and as a tool through which a child or novice – in the case of older individuals – acquires knowledge in the course of his life and practices from someone more experienced. (Hecht 2011, 48)

During fieldwork, we found some indications that lead me to believe that it is possible to establish a relationship between the effective use of the Guarani language and the process of becoming a member of an ‘ethnic work group.’

We have a very close relationship with our generation...we always say to our children that they should not lose their identity just because they live in a different country, wherever you are...but then, those who are born here, they lose it automatically...you get out of the habit of speaking and thinking in Guarani...you put it aside little by little...people of our age, have to try to keep our language alive. (Interview with Gualberto, Paraguayan laborer, February 2011)

In the story of my informant, certain concern is foreshadowed about the growing ‘abandonment’ of Guarani by the children of migrants born in Argentina. However, different views arose on whether to maintain communication in the mother tongue or not. While some workers are aware that some issues related to culture and identity are transmitted through the Guarani language, others highlighted very different dimensions of the same process:

I mean, here, I’m fine...so I say to my countrymen: ‘guys, let’s talk in Spanish’...I remember saying to them: when dad was at home, he used to prohibit us to speak in Guarani... Spanish was all right...and there are peasants who come here and do not know how to say ‘Hi’ in Spanish...of course, I understand...I am not saying it is their fault...partly, it is...you cannot come here without knowing how to say ‘hello’...you have to be able to communicate with your boss...do you understand me?...and that angers me. (Interview with Esquivel, one of the few Paraguayan workers contacted during fieldwork who came from Asunción - principal city of Paraguay, January 2009)

This second point of view suggests that the Guarani language can also be thought of as a barrier to communication, in the sense of putting some distance between the immigrant workers and employers. At the same time, it is interesting to see how, from an early age and within the household, the use of Guarani language acquires distinctive valorizations, in many cases linked to the further adulthood. In this regard, and as was noted before, ‘different studies show a tendency among many immigrants to associate the indigenous language (in this case, the Guarani) with the past, the field and poverty, while the Spanish represents opportunities for social advancement, systematic training and progress’ (Novaro 2011, 189). The fluent use of Spanish is considered an invaluable tool by Paraguayan workers, especially since, in general, the more successful migrants are characterized by their competence in the use of ‘the language of the employers.’ As a related issue, and given that the Guarani is a fundamentally oral language, many immigrants cannot write it or, if they can, they make many mistakes. While the fact of speaking Spanish fluently cannot be considered in itself a guarantee for social integration to the host society, it is said to provide a much more advantageous starting point for access to employment and to acquire general experience in a big city like Buenos Aires.

In this context, some contradictions of the production process are expressed through a discourse that underestimates Paraguayan workers because they are not able to ‘speak properly.’ As I want to show, this kind of underestimation legitimates their exploitation by treating them as ‘subalterns from origin.’

Language is a small ... serious drawback because the Paraguayan citizen uses Guaraní to communicate, in a high percentage ... and even more if he comes from the countryside ... then becoming part of this enormous city will be difficult for him ... the language, the characteristics of life which are very different ... for him ... in that sense ... so, in that sense it is a problem ... in Paraguay, in the countryside, all communication takes place in Guaraní ... a different culture, so they have serious problems for integrating here ... from the first moment ... luckily, due to the fact that they are hard workers, Paraguayan people are always accepted. (Interview with Miguel, a member of a Paraguayan social organization of Quilmes, Buenos Aires, February 2011)

During fieldwork, we had the chance to witness several situations where Argentinians mocked the Paraguayans because of how they spoke Spanish. They were often imitated by natives through a 'stereotypical' performance of their way of speaking.

For better or worse, the peasants have their accent ... have their way of interpreting the words ... That's not because they cannot speak ... but it is their style ... and here we have correntinos, santiagueños (Argentinian internal migrants) who also have a particular accent ... then, why do not give some peace of mind for people ... do not make fun of our accent ... we have a different accent but other South American countries have their accent too, so if we are going to laugh at that, so let's make fun of everyone. (Interview with Don Ponciano, construction worker for many years, now retired, member of a Paraguayan social organization of Quilmes, Buenos Aires, February 2011)

The difficulties in sustaining an effective communication process between natives and immigrants do not always end in good terms. An incident occurred when an Argentinian contractor decided to dismiss the Paraguayan foreman in a site, because 'he could not understand what he was saying.' According to the contractor, the situation had reached the point where the misunderstandings were negatively impacting on the progress of the work. In relation to this, and since we had the opportunity to talk several times with both the contractor and the foreman, we can affirm that, rather than differences related to language, the problems between the two seem to have had more to do with the different ways they conceived the tasks to be performed. Thus, while the Paraguayan foreman (newcomer, with a short experience in construction but a long experience directing crews in the countryside) wanted to direct the work crew in a particular way, performing tasks (chopped surfaces, plaster, application of silicone, and other products), the contractor believed this should be resolved otherwise. In this sense, what ended up being named as a communication problem caused by the 'misuse of Spanish' of the foreman, in fact, seems to have had more to do with different views on the timing and the way the task should have been completed. In this sense, we can start to glimpse at the importance of bilingual foremen in the sites. They need to be understood both by the builders and by Argentinian site managers and contractors.

In the case of ... men, especially with speech ... as most come from the countryside, they are discriminated because of their language ... they were mistreated and could not speak Spanish ... and there were cases, for example, when they were verbally abused for not understanding ... supposedly, so they were 'stupid,' 'donkeys' or whatever ... When Paraguayans came to Argentina, forty, fifty years ago, they tried to mimic the Argentinians, they would not say they were Paraguayan because they were going to be discriminated ... then they hid their nationality, identity ... then tried to resemble the Argentinians as much as possible ... so many people would not get involved in our cultural activities. (Interview with Horacio, who

served several years as a construction worker and now directs a Paraguayan cultural association in the district of San Martín, Buenos Aires, March 2011)

The interviews show that, on the one hand, the use of the Guaraní language plays a central role in the re-creation of ethnicity among Paraguayan rural workers who meet for the first time in a construction site of Buenos Aires. They use language to transmit values, teachings, and to generally express a shared worldview that helps them cope emotionally with the hard work and the migratory experience in general. The problem arises when, for native Argentinians, the use of an indigenous language in the workplace becomes an ethnic demarcation element that legitimizes contempt and derision to the person who uses that language. Analytically, ethnic differentiation is not only built on cultural aspects but interpreted also as a class differentiation, since the use of the indigenous language speaks about subalternity of its user.

Conclusions

We have argued that, in the construction industry of Buenos Aires, the exploitation of Paraguayan workers is legitimated through a differential assessment of the workforce they bring (in opposition to the one provided by natives). This differential assessment defines them, at the same time, as *ethnically diverse* and *socially inferior*. The 'invention' of Paraguayans as a specific 'ethno-working group' arises from considering the ethnicity of workers as a symbolic dimension of their workforce, and in this sense, as a component of the surplus value that can be extracted from them. Guaraní language appears as the evidence of this constitutive subalternity.

From Marx ([1867] 1947) we know that the growing surplus extraction occurs mainly from two mechanisms: the extension of working hours and/or the increased work intensity. For the present case, both mechanisms are common to the experience of any worker in the construction industry. However, as we showed before, for Paraguayan immigrants other mechanisms must be added, those that are based on social constructions that show them ethnically 'fit for hard work' and socially 'incompetent to perform other tasks.' In other words, mechanisms based on considerations of immigrants as being 'subalterns from origin.'

We focused on the use of language as a clear example (although certainly not the only one) of our argument. In the sites, the use of Guaraní language is thought of as a barrier to communication, which strengthens and re-demonstrates the distance between the immigrant workers and their employers. Moreover, given that many migrants come from rural areas, Guaraní monolingual legitimates acts of exploitation, as long as it defines workers, as we suggested, as 'unable to understand some things.' Undoubtedly, this veils the subalternization process taking place within the construction industry.

We argued that, in these labor contexts, the use of Guaraní language is usually presented as a 'proof' of inferiority, an aspect of people that makes them less competent in general. In this vein, the use of an indigenous language works as the first argument, the 'most obvious evidence' of their limitations to comply in a timely manner with assigned tasks. In other words, if a Paraguayan worker makes a mistake, the first and most effective explanation is the one that blames him for not speaking the hegemonic

language and, therefore, for being cognitively unable to understand how to 'get things done.'

However, we also tried to show that Guarani language is strongly related to the cooperative organization of labor in the sites. Although for reasons of space we will not be able to discuss it here, as previously noted, the use of Guarani language improves the cooperation among workers not only by creating a better working climate, but also by generating a greater collective tolerance to overexploitation.¹²

At the same time, this cooperation also becomes a factor of production, namely in a concrete contribution to the production process resulting in increased productive capacity of the working crew. So, in these labor contexts, Guarani languages serves both as an unavoidable component of internal cohesion of the group and as a production factor resulting from it.

As Wolf (1982) demonstrated, social relations of production alter the ways in which ethnic boundaries are reconfigured, diverging in a domestic economy and in a capitalist economy. Thus, ethnicity does not 'migrate' the way people do (Del Águila 2009). Presupposing certain ethnic characteristics obscures the true processes of redefinition that may be taking place in the workplace itself and/or the host society.

From the issues discussed in this article, we will outline some final reflections regarding the complexity of any analytical attempt that intends to separate class and ethnicity in the specific ambit of construction sites. This inevitably brings us back to the notions of segmented labor markets (Wolf 1982) and producer contexts of ethnicity (Comaroff and Comaroff 1992; Fenton 1999) in the attempt to explain in which sense ethnicity participates in the industry.

As in other workspaces, in the construction industry ethnic differences intersect with class differences, assuming complex forms and juxtapositions. In this regard, and as noted by Wolf (1982), disputes within the working class are often further reinforced through appeals to 'racial' and 'ethnic' distinctions. Such mechanisms have the function of placing workers in different hierarchical categories in the labor market; relegating stigmatized populations to the lower levels and insulating of competition at the highest levels.

Although there are rivalries and discriminatory behaviors that rely on ethnic and national differences within the group of workers, solidarity is also built. By contrast, ethnic differentiation is more evident in the relationship between immigrant workers and the site manager, architects, and other Argentinians who do not carry out manual roles in the industry. The construction industry appears as an ethnicity producer workplace (Fenton 1999). As we wanted to show, ethnic differences often only become apparent as a result of work place conflicts. Thus, some conflicts associated with class antagonisms end up being interpreted in ethnic key, as 'ethnic' conflicts. It is through this and many other ways that social class and ethnicity re-shape one another in a construction site, but always under the critical conditions imposed by the process of capitalist production.

Notes

1. The translation of the quotations originally written in Spanish was made by the author. At the same time, in some cases, the author has had to re-translate texts originally written in

English. This is due to different obstacles experienced in accessing those texts in their original language.

2. According to Wallerstein ([1972] 1979, 184), 'ethnic consciousness is eternally latent everywhere. But it is perceived only when groups are threatened with the loss of previously acquired privileges or, conversely, when they think it is a politically expedient for privileges denied for long time.'
3. Briceño-León's proposal (1992) represents a theoretical attempt to analytically reconstruct workplaces in a Marxist key, 'operationalizing' the broader concept of social class in an 'ethnographically documentable reality.' In this sense, it is extremely useful to observe and describe the manifestations of class within specific work units, avoiding the broader link between historical materialism and the more abstract notion of 'mode of production,' which describes longer historical periods (80).
4. Following Wacquant (2003), we understand ethnography as 'social research based on close observation, with people and institutions in real time and space, in which researchers approach (or become part of) the phenomenon in order to detect how and why the subjects act, think and feel in a certain way.'
5. The construction of the sample cannot be considered statistically representative. The sites were selected considering the practical possibilities of access.
6. In each case, the extracts of the interviews presented provide information about the interviewee. In all cases, the identities of the subjects have been protected by giving them pseudonyms. Photographs are included with the authorization of the workers involved.
7. As we have previously analyzed (Del Águila 2009, 2014b) the Encuesta sobre Migraciones Internacionales (INDEC, 2003), shows that a significant portion of the workers who work as laborers in the construction sector of Buenos Aires come from rural or semi-urban areas of Paraguay.
8. An analysis of the categories of 'peasant' or 'peasantry' will not be presented here. Referring to this category would mean taking for granted issues that go beyond our hypotheses. We will only refer to this category when the authors we mentioned herewith do so, but we will just consider the immigrants as 'small producers' (Meillasoux 1972) in Paraguay. With this in mind, we seek to point out only the basic relationship of material asymmetry (leading to symbolic asymmetries) that differentiates these men from the major producers and landowners that characterize the system of land tenure in Paraguay. Alluding to the category of 'peasantry' would imply a deep background check which is far from being exhausted here.
9. As a complement to the above, we must clarify that the category 'Paraguayan countryside' (as well as 'peasant culture') has the disadvantage of covering (rather than clarifying) the important differences among producers, families, and regions. By accepting it, there exists the risk of conceiving the totality of social relations that prevail in these contexts as harmonic, non-hierarchical, and 'egalitarian.' Even though that is not the purpose of this section, the reader should know that it is not our intention here to 'idealize' the social relations that characterize some rural areas of Paraguay, but rather, to present them as what they are: contradictory social relations of production.
10. While we cannot dwell on this, it should be recalled that during the decade of the 1990s, the construction union of Argentina (UOCRA) joined the xenophobic discourse that blamed immigrants for unemployment. In this context, they were criminalized, considered undesirable, and carriers of diseases (Grimson 2006). While it cannot be exclusively attributed to this, fieldwork showed that while the natives usually have in mind the existence of a union that can intervene before a claim to employers, immigrants do not usually consider calling upon this institution against similar demands. On the contrary, in many cases interviewees suggested us that doing so would mean acting 'recklessly' since, being foreigners, unionization would be 'frowned upon' by employers.
11. The Census of Population and Housing of Paraguay (DGEEC 2002) showed that the monolingual Guaraní population was 28.8 per cent; monolingual in Spanish, 10 per cent;

bilingual, 52.6 per cent and speakers of other languages, 8.6 per cent (of which, 3 per cent was Portuguese). Following Makaran (2014), a superficial calculation of these data reveals that more than half of Paraguayans are bilingual, almost 82 per cent speak Guarani and 63 per cent can speak Spanish. In this sense, the Paraguayan bilingualism, with a slight predominance of Guarani, would be a statistically proven fact. However, as the author suggests, a deeper analysis of census shows strong linguistic evidence disproportions between town and country. In this vein, the concept of 'Paraguayan bilingualism,' rather than revealing, hides the true relationship between the two languages. Actually, this manifests itself in different ways according to the origin of the subjects. As the author notes, 'the majority of Paraguayans declared as their mother/dominant language Guarani. Conversely, Spanish linguistic skills range from satisfactory to completely passive' (Makaran 2014, 202).

12. This will work for future references to the ways in which the Guarani language participates in processes of resistance and hidden speech (Scott 2000; Spivak 1998).

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank José Itzigsohn and Carolina Domínguez for their helpful and generous comments on a draft of this article. Part of the ethnographic material was first discussed (in Spanish) in a journal article: 'Etnicidad y clase social entre migrantes paraguayos en la industria de la construcción del Área Metropolitana de Buenos Aires,' in *Trabajo y Sociedad*, 23: 439–463. They have however been reworked as part of the process of re-analysis for this new article. The journal's website can be found at <http://www.unse.edu.ar/trabajosociedad>.

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