

# **‘The Right to Live with Dignity’: Politicising Experiences of Precarity through ‘Popular Economy’ in Argentina**

**DELORES SENORANS**

**University of Buenos Aires**

This article takes an ethnographic perspective to analyse the ways in which social movements in Buenos Aires, Argentina, politicise experiences of precarity through the creation of popular economy initiatives. I argue that we cannot understand these organising processes exclusively in relation to the pursuit of ‘formalisation’ or the improvement of working conditions. I contend that in the context of new forms of State intervention in popular sectors, the notions of ‘rights’ – both to labour and to the city- that these movements put forward, express ways of envisioning full inclusion in society that encompass notions of worthiness and ‘dignified life’, forged over the course of grassroots political action.

Keywords: Precarity, rights, dignity, social movements, popular economy, ethnography

After Néstor Kirchner took office in 2003, Argentina experienced a period of rapid economic growth and socio-political change that academics associate to the ‘Left Turn’ or ‘Postneoliberal Turn’ implemented by certain Latin American governments (Grugel and Riggirozzi, 2012; Arditi, 2008). During the early years of Kirchner’s presidency, the economic crisis that had detonated the massive protests of December 2001, was starting to ease because the government had implemented a number of public policies that sought to reconstitute the economy and to recover the state authority that had undergone massive social rejection in previous years. Soon, Kirchner’s economic policies reduced unemployment, recovered the purchasing power of wages and improved the income distribution considerably (Beccaria and Maurizio,

2012). However, a vast informal and unwaged production sector developed and grew, benefiting from the increase in consumption (Gago, 2014).

In this context, the government developed new forms of intervention designed both to combat both informal work and to extend 'rights,' promoting the 'inclusion' of the 'socially vulnerable' through the creation of worker cooperatives and other modes of registering individual and familial forms of labour. Rather than alleviating a supposedly temporary social condition, as the workfare programs implemented during 1990s had, these policies sought to generate 'genuine work' by promoting forms of associative work, self-employment and entrepreneurship (Danani, 2012; Grassi, 2012). The most extensive programs were Manos a la Obra (Getting to Work) and Argentina Trabaja (Argentina Works) implemented in 2003 and 2009, respectively, which focused on forming cooperatives; the Asignación Universal Por Hijo (Universal Allowance per Child), which extended family allowances to the unemployed and informal workers; and the Monotributo Social (Individual Social Tax), a low income tax rate established to encourage the registration of informal workers and which entitled them to retirement benefits, health insurance and the ability to invoice customers.

In this context, a large number of political organisations, some of which had a long history of grassroots political action against neoliberal reforms in the 1990s, had turned their efforts to organising and developing production, commercialisation and work practices in popular sectors. In 2011 a number of these organisations, notably the Movimiento Evita (Evita Movement) and the Movimiento de Trabajadores Excluidos (Excluded Workers Movement), came together to create a union: the Confederación de Trabajadores de la Economía Popular (CTEP, Popular Economy Workers Confederation). This union was meant to represent a very heterogeneous collection of workers: from worker-recovered enterprises, recyclers' cooperatives, street vendors and popular market traders to cooperatives set up by social movements or created through public policies.

I came into contact with CTEP in 2013 through the Organización Social y Política Los Pibes (Social and Political Organisation the Children, Los Pibes), based in La Boca, Buenos Aires. That same

year I had started doing fieldwork with Los Pibes for my PhD because I was interested in cooperatives run by social movements. Los Pibes, which had joined CTEP in May 2013, runs a housing cooperative, a textile cooperative, a community radio station that was also registered as a workers' cooperative, and a market that sells products from different popular economy enterprises. Moreover, the organisation has a long history of grassroots political action in the neighbourhood that goes back to the mid-1990s and a strong reputation for fighting for employment and decent public housing in Buenos Aires.

In January 2015 I travelled with a group of activists from CTEP to San Martín de Los Andes, a small tourist town in Patagonia, to attend a political training course. The group was small but diverse: all of the attendees came from popular economy enterprises, including one activist from Los Pibes' radio station. During the very first day of class, one of the union leaders explained that 'popular economy' referred not just to 'informal' or 'unregistered' economic practices but also to 'the economy of the excluded' (*los excluidos*): those who had been forced to 'invent their own work to survive' after the neoliberal reforms. In fact, many of these popular economy enterprises had registered with the government and others were in the process of becoming formalised through the policies to which I have just referred. He went on to explain that the problem was one not of properly 'registering' these practices but of guaranteeing their workers 'rights', something that formalisation would not bring on its own. He emphasised not only popular economy workers' creativity in 'inventing' work but also the popular economy's 'shortcomings' in terms of political demands.

Taking my interlocutor's reflections as a starting point for discussion, in this article I want to argue that we cannot understand this organisation process only in relation to the pursuit of 'formalisation' or the improvement of working conditions, but rather as a process that has its roots in the politicisation of everyday experiences of precarity. My analysis seeks to engage with the recent discussion regarding the notion of precarity in social sciences. As Michael Denning has pointed out, 'unemployment' and the 'informal sector' are two conceptual categories that have long dominated our understanding of 'wage-less lives' as being incomplete or 'lacking' compared to wage employment (Denning, 2011). On the contrary,

this recent literature has suggested that instead of viewing precarity as a position in the labour market, we should analyse it as an experience that includes both work and broader life conditions such as housing, debt, social relationships and subjectivity. Therefore, some authors have defined it as a socioeconomic condition and an ‘ontological experience’ (Neilson and Rossiter, 2008: 55) modelled by histories and experiences of capitalism in specific locations (Millar, 2014). This notion seeks to capture the effects on everyday life of contemporary forms of accumulation and valuation of capital whose borders expand to include spaces and subjects constructed as marginal and peripheral, producing both urban and territorial dispossession and the development of forms of exploitation based on informal, illegal, or even servile work (Gago and Mezzadra, 2015).

However, while some authors (Barchiesi, 2012; Denning, 2011) have argued that theories about citizenship and rights, and about the way States extend or deny citizenship, do not provide an adequate account of these experiences and how to transform them, the specific language associated with ‘rights’ is nonetheless highly significant to social movement activists and participants in Argentina. In this article, I want to contribute to this debate by analysing the ways in which experiences of precarity become politicised through popular notions of ‘rights’, enabling the production of political subjectivities in both a collective and an individual sense. I argue that the notions of ‘rights’ put forward by these movements both reinforce the political and symbolic value of worker identity related to the historical construction of citizenship in Argentina and, at the same time, express ways of envisioning full inclusion in society that encompass broader notions of a ‘dignified life’ and collective *lucha* (struggle) forged over the course of grassroots political action. Through an analysis of the trajectory of one organisation that belongs to CTEP – Los Pibes – I will show the shifting ways this politicisation took shape in different social, political and economic contexts over the past 20 years in Argentina. As Munck (2013) has argued, precarity has been a constant throughout Latin American history. After the neoliberal reforms of the 1990s, however, popular organisations built creative and distinctive ways of collectivising the reproduction of life that persist even today (Federici, 2013). I will explore the development of this collectivisation in Argentina in the late

1990s and early 2000s and how it was later transformed to incorporate alternative ways of producing, commercialising and consuming food within the popular economy. These changes must be understood in relation to the redistributive public policies implemented since 2003, which, though they did not change the bases of the accumulation model, nonetheless had important consequences for how political debate took shape, especially in terms of the increased importance of demands for ‘rights’ both to labour and the city.

This article presents results from my doctoral research and draws on a collective line of enquiry developed by the research team of which I form a part, based at the University of Buenos Aires and led by María Inés Fernández Álvarez. This larger research project aims to analyse the ways in which subaltern sectors collectively develop creative practices to address the production and reproduction of life within experiences of precarity. My doctoral research was developed from an ethnographic perspective based on the construction of data through shared experience during fieldwork (Rockwell, 2009). This approach allows the capture of practices, relationships and heterogeneous meanings constructed by individuals in everyday life, taking into account the social and historical experiences they express (Achilli, 2005). My fieldwork was conducted between May 2013 and October 2016. During that time, I accompanied activists from Los Pibes on their daily activities in work spaces, participating in protests, assemblies, special activities and meetings both internal and with other organisations or civil servants. From the start, I expressed my wish to develop my research while also collaborating with the organisations’ daily efforts. I assisted with administrative tasks such as preparing grant applications to present before the government, and also prepared political training workshops and written materials. Establishing my relationship in the field in this way was vital to enhancing my ability to conduct this research, since it allowed me to be recognised as a *compañera*, an affective and political category that stresses the strength and value of the bond forged between people who belong to the same collective and share a common political objective. I was able to reconstruct the history of Los Pibes mainly through informal conversations and the analysis of written and audiovisual material produced by the collective. I also did four in-depth interviews: two with

leaders and two with neighbours who had participated in the organisation from the beginning. I conducted these interviews toward the end of the research process to get detailed life narratives of people I had already identified as being representative of the rest. Furthermore, since October 2014 I have been collaborating with CTEP's political training committee as a workshop facilitator. In this paper, I do use the organisations' real names, as agreed on with their members, but I have decided to change individual people's names to respect confidentiality.

## **Dignity, Work and Rights in Argentina**

In December 2014 I joined a CTEP protest in front of the Buenos Aires casino, a private company. The group's basic demands that day were the formal recognition of the union and the provision of a 'Christmas bonus', something the rest of the unions had been demanding, given the high inflation rate (23.9 percent) at the time (La Nación, 14 Jan. 2015).

Why was the protest being held there? The central argument was that the gaming industry causes 'social damage' and should therefore be obliged by the government to redistribute part of its profits to 'those in need'. In an interview, one of the activists from Los Pibes said, 'Formal workers can negotiate their salaries through their unions, and they have the right to paid holidays and an *aguinaldo* [a bonus given to workers in June and December]'. In closing, he noted that popular economy workers had the same 'right to live with dignity' as any other worker. The resources needed to accomplish this goal, he argued, should come from rich business owners, whom he characterised as 'profiteers'. The press release that CTEP sent out the following day stated, 'As popular economy workers, our basic needs go unfulfilled because we are excluded from labour protection systems even though our labour and the wealth we produce are a vital part of the real economy and value chains'.

The activists' effort to seek legitimacy for their protest highlights a central aspect of the popular economy, a highly political notion that emphasises the social and economic value of certain activities, thereby subverting the stigmatisation of workers. On the one hand, the workers were asserting the

importance of their production in economic terms, linking economic value to their claims for full civic membership, which basically means being viewed as people worthy of having rights. When CTEP leaders claim their workers are ‘the excluded’, they do not mean that the workers’ economic practices are disconnected from capitalist accumulation, but rather that even though their work produces substantial profits for large companies – as in the case of street vendors who sell products from major brands – they are excluded from the possibility of having a job *en blanco* (in the white): a job in the formal economy. In fact, many of the people I came to know during my fieldwork did not have any previous experience of that sort of employment or had experienced it only for short periods of time.

But CTEP was also claiming that poor workers had the ‘right to live with dignity’, calling into question the distribution of wealth in the country – accusing it of being ‘unfair’ and contrary to ‘social justice’ – and condemning the rich and the powerful in moral terms. In E. P. Thompson’s terms, they were putting forward a ‘moral economy’, since their protest was drawing on values, attitudes, expectations and notions of justice as legitimising grounds for their claims (1995). Thompson showed that the eighteenth-century English expressed these values and expectations using the language of patronage and assistance; in contemporary Argentina’s case, the demands were formulated in a language associated with wage labour. The activists emphasised, first, that even though the workers did not generate enough profitability to earn the equivalent of a minimum salary, government programs should subsidise this sector and, second, that these policies should to be thought of as support for production and workers’ ‘rights’ rather than as government *asistencialismo* (assistance), a notion often associated with charity.

In Argentina dignity has historically been associated with the image of the worker as an identity that defines people’s and collectives’ worth (Fernández Álvarez, 2017). In fact, since the 1950s citizenship has been associated with protected employment and the organised labour movement (Grassi et al., 1994). Daniel James’s historical research provides us with important insights into this association between work and dignity. James argued that workers’ experiences during the government of Juan Domingo Perón (1944-1955) were shaped to accommodate a narrative in which they were said to have

recovered their dignity and self-respect. As James documents, Peron's government guaranteed fundamental rights for workers (collective bargaining, salary scales, maternity and sick leave, social security, paid holidays, etc.) and established the worker as the core unit of social citizenship. In accordance with these historical moral constructs of worthiness, CTEP created a demand for 'rights' for members of the popular economy as workers who constituted a 'sector' of the Argentine working class. Thus, they defined this organisation as a union and demanded it be formally recognised, claiming that these workers were also being denied the right to form and join a union.

The terms in which CTEP's demands were framed differed from those formulated by popular organisations during the 1990s and early 2000s. A number of scholars have shown that unemployed workers' movements and worker-recovered enterprises in Argentina demanded 'dignified work', a notion defined as opposite to both the workfare policies implemented during those years and the situation of unemployment they would otherwise find themselves in (Fernández Álvarez, 2017; Dinerstein, 2014; Manzano, 2013). Thanks to the public policies implemented during the Kirchners' administrations and the rapid economic growth during that period, the language associated with 'rights' and employment regained centrality in social movements' demands. Rather than being unemployed, many members of the working class participated in what Veronica Gago (2014) calls 'baroque economies': economic practices with low productivity and various levels of informality that combine scrambling for public resources with kinship and community relations. In this context, the novelty of CTEP's claims lies in their questioning of the government's narratives of 'development', since, as the group's leaders explained, 'development and growth are not the same as work and dignity for the whole working class' (Pérsico and Grabois, 2014).

It may seem that the notion of 'rights' – and of 'dignity' – these activists were promoting in public discourse is defined in relation to a series of values associated with a longing for the sort of inclusion that wage labour guarantees, what some authors have called 'Fordism as a dreamscape' (Muelebach and Shoshan, 2012) or 'working class melancholia' (Barchiesi, 2012). But I want to suggest that within CTEP the popular economy as an imagined and desired political project promotes notions of rights that go

beyond the limited sense of security often associated with Fordism – job stability and social security – also encompassing other aspects associated with having a good life: a life with ‘dignity’.

As we will see, the notions of ‘rights’ being endorsed by these organisations cannot be understood without taking a closer look at their longer trajectories of grassroots political action. In the sections that follow I want to explore the shifting ways in which precarity was politicised in these popular organisations by analysing the trajectory of one of the organisations that brought this union to life: Los Pibes.

### **From ‘Needs’ to ‘Rights’**

La Boca is one of the most symbolic neighbourhoods of Buenos Aires. It lies in the south of the city, very close to the financial centre. In the early twentieth century, poor European immigrants developed its characteristic features and reputation. On one hand, *conventillos* – colourful houses built of wood and tin and shared by large numbers of families – created a distinctive urban scenery that is still appreciated by tourists. On the other hand, as the location of the main docks and some of the first rudimentary industries that flourished in Argentina, La Boca has long been home to workers and popular sectors and has served as an incubator for their forms of political organising.

Around 1994, when the activists who later created Los Pibes started their political activities in La Boca, this neighbourhood still retained its popular spirit: land was very cheap, and the majority of its inhabitants were families that had come from neighbouring countries, the northern provinces of Argentina, or even other illegal settlements elsewhere in the city from which they had been evicted. As one of the Los Pibes activists told me during my first visit to the organisation, the practice of ‘buying and selling keys’ was widespread. This involved a family’s buying a key to a room or small apartment in a *conventillo* without knowing whether the property had a legal owner who might later attempt to reclaim it. Many others rented their homes from sometimes dubious owners.

This was exactly what had happened with a couple of families these activists knew from a previous enterprise they had taken part in: Giol Wineries in the neighbourhood of Palermo. While resisting the eviction of over 190 families who lived in that building, three activists—all of them university students—met Daniel, who would later become the coordinator of Los Pibes. In 1994 the families were finally evicted by a major police raid. ‘We experienced it as a defeat, but after some time we realised it had been a milestone in the fight for dignified housing in Buenos Aires’, recalled Mariano, who at the time was studying sociology and taking part in a student group that had been organised to fight reforms to public education. After that, they decided they needed to engage in *trabajo territorial* (grassroots militancy) in La Boca, and one of the families that had lived in Giol lent them a small room in their home in Sanchetti, a squat located in a former factory. Right there on 25 May 1996, they officially founded Los Pibes. The economic crisis was biting hard at the time. Unemployment rates were rising, and Los Pibes decided they should address people’s most pressing need: food. They started serving meals for children during weekends and holidays and later distributed food for entire families to eat in their homes. Carolina, another of the founders of Los Pibes, explained to me that they had not wanted to be like ‘a traditional *comedor* (soup kitchen)’, typically run by the church or Caritas. Instead, they wanted to ‘preserve families and the habit of eating together in the home’.

To do so, Los Pibes created the ‘justice criteria’, a way to distribute what had been achieved through ‘struggle’: mainly groceries that were donated by shop owners or distributed by the government. This process consisted of assigning a number from one to five to evaluate each individual collectively in relation to commitments and duties within the organisation: attending protests and assemblies, unloading and organising the groceries, cleaning, etc. The underlying idea was to preserve the ‘work culture’ that neoliberalism had eroded by turning people into objects of ‘assistance’. ‘Things had to be distributed among those who work. What gives you membership and rights to what has been achieved is performing some of the activities that allow that benefit to exist’, explained Carolina. According to her, they were trying to impart to every new *compañero* two main ideas: first, that by being united and organised, they

could accomplish what individually would have been impossible, and second, that through collective effort they could regain ‘dignity’, improve living conditions for themselves and their families, and feel like part of that effort rather than being ‘dependent on the assistance of others’ (mainly the state and the church). Daniel, Los Pibes’ coordinator, explained to me that during those initial years – and for the rest of the organisation’s existence – its main goal was to generate ‘popular power’, a political orientation that sought to create ways of collectively self-organising everyday problems. Popular power, as a means and an end for desirable politics, expressed and enacted an idea of the model citizen that was very different from that of the individual who expresses his or her opinion through the ballot box.

But getting food was not the only common problem; so was finding a job. In 2003 Los Pibes organised its first ‘employment commission’, which created nineteen productive projects: a bakery, textile production, silkscreen printing, and many more. At the time, the group belonged to the Federación de Tierra, Vivienda y Hábitat (Land, Housing and Habitat Federation), one of the largest unemployed workers’ movements, which was promoting similar initiatives based on the idea of creating ‘dignified work’. According to Mariano, economic viability was never the main objective of these initiatives; instead, they were trying to generate a space for ‘*contención*’ (containment):

It was a space where *compañeros* could start coming together rather than staying home drinking, taking drugs, and harming themselves. We wanted them to understand that not having a job was not their fault, it was not an individual problem; it was a problem that had its roots in neoliberalism.

At the same time, Los Pibes started organising collective workshops where they read the national Constitution. Mariano recalled, ‘Our *compañeros* read a list of rights and were truly surprised! They asked: What? Do I have all those rights too? Rights as a worker?’ This pedagogical work did not call into question the importance of having a strong work ethic, but neither did it reinforce normative visions of

respectability and individual virtue. Rather than claiming ‘rights’ for property-owning or industrious salaried individual workers, they were appealing to a broader notion of worthiness in which ‘dignity’ was related to collective struggle and organising.

But between 1991 and 1996, things in La Boca started to change. From being a rather forgotten neighbourhood in terms of public investment, it became the locus of rapid urban development. As other scholars have shown, the 1990s saw the advent of a gentrification process in the southern areas of Buenos Aires that generated profound social and spatial transformations, and La Boca was no exception (Girola, 2006). Shore defences were built to prevent regular flooding, and the riverside area was landscaped for leisure. Land prices skyrocketed over the course of just a few years, and evictions became an everyday concern (Herzer et al., 2005).

In this context, housing and the situation in the neighbourhood became a central aspect of Los Pibes’ political practices, and the group fought evictions through a wide variety of approaches. Through direct action ‘in the streets’ and negotiation, they pressured the government to pass a special municipal decree declaring a housing emergency in the neighbourhood (Ordenanza N°525), which allowed them to buy eight *conventillos* and turn them into housing for a number of families from the organisation. This became one of the organisation’s most celebrated *conquistas* (achievements). After that, they went on to participate in the drafting of Law 341, which allows cooperatives in Buenos Aires to apply for loans to build their own homes through mutual aid and self-management. The law, which was finally passed in 2000, allowed the group to build the Cooperativa de Vivienda Los Pibes (COVILPI). Though the project began in 2004, it took over ten years of ‘struggle’ before they could finally move in.

The development of a neighbourhood-based organisation grounded in the notions of ‘rights’ and ‘dignity’ had deep implications for how people thought about themselves. Ana, one of the first *compañeras* from Los Pibes, offered an illustrative account of her involvement with this organisation:

When we said we needed homes for our families, we started the struggle and we got them. The same thing with food, because when we started our struggle we could not feed our children. My

organisation [Los Pibes] changed my life. I learnt that I have rights and that [civil servants] cannot talk to us in complex language to make us go away. And if it weren't for my organisation, I would be dead or in jail, but today I can enjoy my grandchildren. Now I have to keep going, I have a house because of my organisation, a job, but it doesn't end there. I know what it means to cry blood and tears for my children, and I know that there are others currently in that situation, so I have to go out and show that it is possible. I am grateful for my organisation because now I know there is another way of living; my organisation made me a human being.

Ana had been in and out of jail a couple of times and, like most of those who would later become her *compañeros*, did not have any previous sustained involvement with political organisations or political parties. In fact, she remembered that at first she'd been quite suspicious of these new people who had come to the neighbourhood. Almost twenty years later, however, she described her experience in the organisation as a learning process: she went from not knowing and not feeling worthy of 'rights', to knowing and feeling like a human being who deserves a better life. In her own words, the organisation had 'taught' her – through collective 'struggle' – that she had 'rights' no matter what her background. That is why she often referred to Los Pibes as the 'university that the rich had denied them'. She was also saying that by learning her 'rights', she became a human being. Through 'struggle', she and the other activists not only produced the possibility of a better life but also forged deep emotional attachments among one another and a sense of pride in themselves. Learning that she had 'rights' – and that others in the same situation did too – made her a self-aware political subject committed to spreading the word that 'it is possible'. Her words describe the politicisation of experiences of precarity, not as mere 'lack of' but as transformation of the self. As Kathleen Millar states, precarious labour and precarious life shape subjectivity, affect, sociality and desire in different ways according to particular histories and experiences of capitalism in specific locations (2014:35). Ana's words show the impact in Argentina of politics and

collective organising on how people think about themselves and how they push together to build a better life for their families. As I will show in the next section, these values and ways of doing forged through grassroots political action resurfaced in the development of popular economy initiatives within CTEP.

### **Producing Economy: ‘Beyond the Encounter with Commodities’**

By the beginning of 2014, Los Pibes had strengthened its bonds with CTEP. Its incorporation into the union the year before had triggered an intense internal debate on how to ‘transform’ its political activities into popular economy initiatives. For instance, its community radio was formalised as a cooperative. Around that time, the organisation also decided it was time to launch a new initiative related to the housing cooperative: El Paseo. Situated on a former storage site used during the construction of the housing cooperative, El Paseo opened on 22 March 2014. That January, the Cristina Fernández de Kirchner administration had implemented a policy that sought to control rising inflation by establishing a list of supermarket goods with regulated prices: the Precios Cuidados program (Price Control). In this context many popular organisations developed their own strategies for coping with the inflation problem and created markets that sought to provide ‘fair and popular prices’ for consumers, reducing the number of middlemen that characterise retail monopolies.

El Paseo opens its gates to the public every Saturday morning. At around eight o’clock, activists start setting up stalls and arranging groceries brought from other organisations, including jam and tinned food produced by a peasant indigenous movement and yerba mate and tea brought from cooperatives in Misiones, about 1000 km from the capital. Carla brings down bread and half-cooked pizzas from her flat in the housing cooperative. She has been involved in the organisation for over fifteen years. She started going to the *comedor* with her mother back when they lived in Sanchetti, 50 metres away from where El Paseo is today. A couple of months ago, Carla started selling to make some extra money for her household. María, her neighbour from the cooperative and *compañera* in the organisation, often helps her at the stall while they chat. María has to be there anyway because she is responsible for the sound system

used every weekend in El Paseo. She has belonged to the organisation since the mid-1990s, when a neighbour told her that the people at the *comedor* were ‘extremely helpful’. Back then Maria didn’t have a job, her husband had left her and she had to feed her two daughters on her own. In the mornings, she works at the radio station, and in the afternoon she takes care of an elderly woman. At around six in the evening, Maria is back at the organisation to attend class: she is completing high school in the school Los Pibes has set up in collaboration with a public university. On Saturdays she helps out at El Paseo, the same place where once a year María hosts her most anticipated and best-planned activity: the Children’s Day party.

At around the same time, Alberto and Carlos arrive with their products. Alberto brings pork meat and sausages he produces himself, as well as cheese he buys from worker-recovered enterprises. Carlos comes in with vegetables and flowers. He owns a farm near La Plata, where he works with his wife and other relatives, and belongs to an association of horticultural producers that is also involved with CTEP. And last but not least, a truck comes in with fish from a small fishery cooperative called Coopechas, located in Pipinas, a small coastal town in Buenos Aires province.

The goods brought by these organisations are the most valued by the organisers. As Mariano explained to me, they want El Paseo to become a way of achieving ‘food sovereignty’, which means providing food and ‘allowing the neighbours to resolve hunger issues without returning to having a *comedor*’. Mariano told me that they are trying to create an alternative approach to the buying and selling of food, and that this implies not only avoiding intermediaries and lowering prices but also prioritising goods that come from the popular economy. He recognised that, despite their efforts, some goods come from big companies because it is hard to find them in the popular economy. Financing large orders and logistics poses the most problems for this initiative, which involves dealing with the capitalist market while working to create an alternative to it. In any case, providing food produced within the popular economy means forging a political construction that goes beyond the limits of the neighbourhood and requires the creation of strong bonds with producers.

In fact, the relationship between activists from Los Pibes and Coopechas workers or vegetable producers like Carlos goes beyond selling their products at El Paseo. They define it as a ‘political articulation’ that often – though not always – takes shape at the meetings of CTEP’s committee of production and commercialisation, in which they all participate. These relationships also I mutual support during times of conflict. For example, when the future of Coopechas came under threat after an illegal and violent eviction from their premises and the theft of their tools, Los Pibes helped them develop a legal strategy, deal with the police and civil servants, produce press releases to publicise the situation, etc.

Through this political cooperation, they also planned important joint actions. For Easter 2015, a massive seafood sale was organised: 5 tons were sold in only four hours at more than 30 locations around Buenos Aires and the surrounding area. The fish came in by truck to El Paseo and from there were distributed to different markets. While preparing the event and in the days that followed it, the organisers pointed out several aspects that defined the core political value of this effort. First, they said, it was a way to generate income for Coopechas workers, even though they recognised that on that particular occasion the workers would not be getting any substantial profit since they were selling almost at cost. They also stated that the sale was a ‘political event’, raising awareness among a wider public that private resellers were speculating with people’s needs and that they could sell fish at half the regular price, making good quality food affordable for the popular sectors.

Most fundamentally, however, they emphasised that the initiative was meant to show that these goals could be achieved only through the popular economy and organising. More broadly, for Los Pibes, fostering popular organising in the neighbourhood is a way to reclaim that area of the city for its inhabitants. The area had a reputation for being dangerous, so people refused to go there; they want to create new uses for that space so that people can circulate and live in it. If it remained empty, it would eventually be taken over by private developers, who would buy the land very cheap and evict the current occupants. After more than ten years of economic growth and redistributive policies, popular sectors are still fighting to lay claim to urban space. Nevertheless, the terms in which this claim is being formulated

and the practices oriented to achieving it have changed. During a special radio broadcast on the community radio station, Mariano talked about this political stance through an overview of how Los Pibes had thought about its political practices over the past twenty years:

After fighting for our right to work and the right to have a home, we realised that actually we were fighting for the right to live in the city. And that there were enemies who had a totally different intention. They want to kick us out of the city and send us to the suburbs if we are lucky, if not to our provinces of origin, or even our countries of origin.

At many opportunities they described El Paseo as a way of ‘occupying the streets’. How to occupy it and with whom is a crucial matter of reflection. During a public debate on commercialisation held with academics and other political organisations, Gastón, an activist from Los Pibes, spoke reflectively about El Paseo:

El Paseo to us is a cultural fight because it is a very different type of encounter from the one that supermarkets promote: the encounter with merchandise. We don’t want to discuss only prices, how to offer the lowest price. It is a struggle over territory. Supermarkets organise territory and promote subjectivities that serve neoliberalism. El Paseo, in return, produces habitat.

For the activists, ‘habitat’ is a notion that summarises a number of aspects that a neighbourhood needs in order to provide dignified living conditions. It is not only a question of having a ‘roof over our heads’. They emphasise a safe environment, recreational spaces, and the availability of good-quality food at affordable prices and argue that these conditions can be achieved only through popular organising. This is why Gastón described El Paseo as a space where different types of ‘encounters’ occur. In practice, this means that every weekend during and after the market opens its gates, neighbours and activists from other organisations visit COVILPI, members hold meetings with neighbours who want to establish new

cooperatives, students from public universities work on developing special collaborative projects, and even local bands or artistic groups perform for the visitors.

The ethnographic account given above of the practices and relationships that are El Paseo's lifeblood provokes reflection on how precarity has been politicised in everyday life. On the one hand, this politicisation makes it clear that the struggle for urban space has continued to be a focal point for organising and a central demand despite the rights secured and the advances made, in social and economic terms, over the past decade. In this new context, this dispute was also formulated in terms of 'rights', such as the 'right to the city'. This demand encompassed both the unsolved need for housing but also broader aspects related to city living such as the use of public space for leisure, access to healthy and affordable food, and good jobs. Los Pibes sought to build this 'right' on a daily basis through the popular economy. Furthermore, the experience of El Paseo allows us to reflect on creative ways in which their own trajectory of grassroots political action and the values forged through it were developed into an initiative that involved a different strategy for collectively organising the reproduction of life made possible by the new situation. This is why Mariano spoke of El Paseo as a means to 'resolving hunger' through a market and without returning to being a *comedor* as in the 1990s and early 2000s. Nevertheless, the practices and relationships that give shape to these popular markets established by social organisations destabilise common assumptions about the economy as a rational separate sphere of social action and of work as wage labour. In fact, the previous description of El Paseo's everyday life offers multiple examples of exchange, objects and relationships that express different valuation processes – beyond mere calculation of profit – and through which collective politics and subjects are produced. Drawing on Narotzky and Besnier's (2014) work, we can conceptualise these practices and relationships as ways of 'making a living', practices that allow people to create lives that are 'worth living', engaging in activities often seen as 'noneconomic' or 'deficient' such as participation in political organisations. In sum, in El Paseo's everyday life, producing a worker-centred economy, popular power and a dignified place to live were one and the same thing.

## Conclusions

In this article, I have shown the ways in which popular organisations in Argentina have politicised experiences of precarity over the past 20 years. Drawing on precarity as an analytical category, I have explored how these organisations invented creative ways of collectivising the reproduction of life and the political and pedagogical work involved in the production of individual and collective political subjects through popular notions of ‘rights’. I have shown how values forged through grassroots political action – such as ‘dignity’ and ‘popular power’ – have endured and even gained a new dimension since organisations took a political stance in support of the popular economy in the context of economic growth and new forms of government intervention in popular sectors.

But one element emerges as a constant in these processes of organisation: the centrality given to work. As we have seen in the case of Los Pibes, although initially the group’s practices were geared toward restoring the ‘culture of work’ through different means – including the creation of their first productive projects – its later commitment to creating a popular economy positions work as a guarantee of rights and a form of political action that can create an alternative to the capitalist market. An analysis of ethnographic material from Argentina offers a different image from that proposed by Guy Standing in *The Precariat: A New Dangerous Class* (2011). In that book, Standing states that the new precariat does not have a ‘work-based identity’ or feel like part of a community defined by occupation, with stable practices and codes of ethics, which makes them ‘opportunistic’ and ‘dangerous’. While Standing contends that the precariat is a class in the making since the absence of a work-based identity obstructs its political organisation, other authors have asserted that this sort of identity would set limits on collective processes of organisation and emancipation. They have suggested that political projects based on labour and rights are conservative political imaginings that reinforce capitalist work ethics and discipline, characterising them as forms of ‘melancholia’ (Barchiesi, 2012) or ‘nostalgia’ (Berlant, 2007). However, the experiences and demands of social movements in Argentina point in a different direction. While the

notions of ‘rights’ that are being put forward by these movements reinforce the political and symbolic value of worker identity, at the same time they encompass other aspects necessary for a ‘dignified life’, including labour but also housing and broader conditions for livelihood in urban environments. As Fernández Álvarez (2016) has pointed out, rather than being ‘nostalgic’ for a way of working based on the Fordist imagination, these popular economy initiatives invent new ways of working and producing. For Los Pibes, the creation of ‘their own work’, as they often refer to it, allows them to build not only ‘popular economy’, providing a service for neighbours – through the commercialisation of goods – but also a place for living a ‘dignified life’.

Precarity as an analytical category sheds light on the ways inequality is politicised in late capitalism. It highlights how people struggle to make their lives better and ‘dignified’ under conditions that make manifest in everyday life what Harvey (2012) has referred to as the dialectic between the expanded reproduction of capitalism and dispossession. In the course of these struggles, the dichotomy of formality/informality of work does not give a complete account of an experience that cuts across multiple dimensions of life. Nevertheless, thinking through the politicisation of precarity places at the centre of our research quests local notions of worthiness and dignity that nourish people’s projects of livelihood and their forms of political mobilisation.

## **Acknowledgments**

I wish to thank P. O’Hare for organising the Society of Latin American Studies panel in April 2016 for which this text was originally prepared and S. Lazar and G. Denyer Willis for their comments on that earlier version. I am also extremely grateful to the anonymous reviewers whose suggestions were very important for clarifying and developing my argument. The preparation of the earlier draft of this article was supported by a research grant from the Centre of Latin American Studies at the University of Cambridge, and my doctoral research is supported by the Consejo Nacional de Investigaciones Científicas y Técnicas (CONICET) in Argentina.

## References

- Achilli, E. (2005) *Investigar en antropología social: los desafíos de transmitir un oficio*. Laborde: Rosario.
- Arditi, B. (2008) 'Arguments about the Left Turns in Latin America: A Post-liberal Politics?'. *LARR* **43**(3): 59-81.
- Barchiesi, F. (2012) 'Liberation of, Through, or from Work? Postcolonial Africa and the Problem with 'Job Creation' in the Global Crisis'. *Interface: A Journal For and About Social Movements* **4**(2): 230-253.
- Beccaria, L., and Maurizio, R. (2012) 'Reversión y continuidades bajo dos regímenes macroeconómicos diferentes. Mercado de trabajo e ingresos en Argentina. 1990-2010'. *Desarrollo Económico*, **52**(206): 205-228.
- Berlant, L. (2007) 'Nearly Utopian, Nearly Normal: Post-Fordist Affect in La Promesse and Rosetta'. *Public Culture*, **19**(2): 273-301.
- Danani, C. (2012) 'La otra década de reformas de las políticas sociales y laborales. Argentina, 2002-2010'. *Revista de Ciencias Sociales* (135): 59-72.
- Denning, M. (2011) 'Vida sin salario'. *New Left Review* (66): 77-94.
- Dinerstein, A. C. (2014) 'Disagreement and Hope: The Hidden Transcripts in the Grammar of Political Recovery in Post-crisis Argentina' in Levey, C., Ozarow, D., Wylde, C. (eds.) *Argentina since the 2001: Recovering the Past, Reclaiming the Future*. Palgrave Macmillan: New York, 115-133.
- Federici, S. (2013) *Revolución en punto cero: trabajo doméstico, reproducción y luchas feministas*. Traficantes de sueños: Madrid.
- Fernández Álvarez, M. I. (2017) *La política afectada: Tramas y reveses de una etnografía en Brukman recuperada*. Prohistoria: Rosario.

- Fernández Álvarez, M. I. (2016) 'La potencialidad de las situaciones truncas para el estudio de la política colectiva' in Fernández Álvarez (ed.) *Hacer juntos. Contornos, relieves y dinámicas de las prácticas políticas colectivas en sectores subalternos*. Editorial Biblos: Buenos Aires, 223-244.
- Gago, V. (2014) *La razón neoliberal: economías barrocas y pragmática popular*. Traficantes de sueños: Buenos Aires.
- Gago, V. and Mezzadra, S. (2015) 'Para una crítica de las operaciones extractivas del capital: Patrón de acumulación y luchas sociales en el tiempo de la financiarización'. *Nueva sociedad* (255): 38-52.
- Girola, M. F. (2006) 'Procesos de transformación urbana en la Región Metropolitana de Buenos Aires: una mirada sobre el avance de la ciudad-negocio'. *Intersecciones en antropología* 7: 361-374.
- Grassi, E. (2012) 'Política socio laboral en la Argentina contemporánea. Alcances, novedades y salvedades'. *Revista de Ciencias Sociales* (135): 185-198.
- Grassi, E., Hintze, S., and Neufeld, M. R. (1996) 'Crisis del Estado de Bienestar y construcción del sentido de las políticas sociales'. *Cuadernos de Antropología Social* (9):15–38.
- Grugel, J., and Riggirozzi, P. (2012) 'Post-neoliberalism in Latin America: Rebuilding and Reclaiming the State after Crisis'. *Development and Change*, 43(1): 1-21.
- Harvey, D. (2012) *Ciudades Rebeldes*. Akal: Madrid.
- Herzer, H., Rodríguez, C., Redondo, A., Di Virgilio, M. and Ostuni, F. (2005) 'Organizaciones sociales en el barrio de La Boca: cambios y permanencias en un contexto de crisis'. *Estudios demográficos y urbanos* 20(2): 269-308.
- James, D. (2010) *Resistencia e integración*. Sudamericana: Buenos Aires.
- Manzano, V. (2013) *La política en movimiento. Movilizaciones colectivas y políticas estatales en la vida del Gran Buenos Aires*. Prohistoria Ediciones: Rosario.
- Millar, K. (2014) 'The Precarious Present: Wageless Labor and Disrupted Life in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil'. *Cultural Anthropology* 29(1): 32–53.

- Muehlebach, A. and Shoshan, N. (2012) 'Post-Fordist Affect: An Introduction'. *Anthropological Quarterly* **85**(2): 317–43.
- Munck, R. (2013) 'The Precariat: A View from the South'. *Third World Quarterly* **34**(5): 747-762.
- Narotzky, S. and Besnier, N. (2014) 'Crisis, Value, and Hope: Rethinking the Economy'. *Current Anthropology* **55**(S9): S4-S16.
- Neilson, B., and Rossiter, N. (2008) 'Precarity as a Political Concept, or, Fordism as Exception'. *Theory, Culture and Society* **25**(7-8): 51-72.
- Pérsico, E., and Grabois, J (2014): *Cuadernos de formación para trabajadores, militantes, delegados y dirigentes de organizaciones populares*. CTEP: Buenos Aires.
- Rockwell, E. (2009) *La experiencia etnográfica: historia y cultura en los procesos educativos*. Paidós: Buenos Aires.
- Standing, G. (2011) *The precariat: The New Dangerous Class*. AandC Black: London.
- Thompson, E. P. (1995) *Costumbres en común*. Crítica: Barcelona.

## **Newspapers**

- La Nación, 2015. La inflación de 2014 cerró entre 31 y 39%, según las mediciones privadas. La Nación, 14 January.