Learning in Struggle
Argentina’s New Worker Cooperatives as Transformative Learning Organizations

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Argentina’s empresas recuperadas por sus trabajadores (worker-recuperated enterprises, or ERTs)
Aims of my presentation

To present an overview of my research work with Argentina’s *empresas recuperadas*.

Soon to be published as a book for Brill/Haymarket’s Historical Materialism series:

*There’s No Stopping the Workers: Crises, Autogestión, and Cooperation in Argentina’s Worker-Recuperated Enterprises*

Synthesis of my case study work:

Research objectives

Influential instances of workplace conversions to worker cooperatives and working-class self-activity.
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To contribute to understanding how workers traversing micro- and macro-economic crises can animate the self-management of formerly private firms in trouble.

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By learning informally and collaboratively “in struggle”...

Transform subjectivities, organizations, and communities.
The methodological framework of my research program

1. Critical theories of technology and organizations of production
2. Working-class political economy
3. Labour process theory and theories of self-management
4. Social movement and workplace learning
Social movement and workplace learning

Social movement and social action learning...

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Workplaces also learning spaces...
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Workplaces also learning spaces...

People constantly learn at work in informal and social ways.
Labour-managed firms and worker coops as learning spaces

Labour-managed firms and worker coops, strong sites of learning.
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make the connection between work and informal and incidental learning at work explicit in the organizational practices of members.
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Workplace democracy promotes participation beyond the workplace as worker-members learn citizenship by “doing” democracy. (Carole Pateman; Daniel Schugurensky)
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Transformative organizations for workers and communities.
Workplace conversions, buy-outs, and takeovers by workers

Concentrated moments of social, informal, and tacit learning and subjectivity transformations.
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The most radical forms of organizational change and sites of expansive learning.

“Each [workplace] takeover is an intense learning process for the workforce as an organisation as well as for individuals—there is a change of social roles, new attitudes [and skills] are required.” (Robert Paton, 1989; also see McCain, 1999, Delahaye, 2005)
Learning-in-struggle

**Expansive learning**

“occurs when contradictions are aggravated over time...; [challenging and questioning] ...existing norms, and the object or motive of activity are reconceptualized into a broader horizon of possibilities.” (Yrjö Engestrom, 2001)
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**Paradigm-shifting learning**
ERTs as “transformative learning organizations,” for workers, for workplaces, and for communities.
Research method

1. A macro-level political economy approach

2. A micro-level ethnographic and extended case studies dimension
The political economy of Argentina’s ERTs

ERT Recuperations Compared to Key Socio-Economic Indicators in Argentina (1991-2008)

- Percentage of Recuperations per Year
- Unemployment Rates
- Underemployment Rates
- Poverty Rates
- Indigence Rates
- Business Closure Rates
- Business Start Up Rates


60.0%
50.0%
40.0%
30.0%
20.0%
10.0%
0.0%
The political economy of Argentina’s ERTs
The micro-level ethnographic and extended case studies dimension

Extended case study approach (Michael Burawoy, 1998)

The lived experiences of self-management

In-situ observations in four case study ERTs, and extended key informant interviews
Chilavert
Chilavert

Unión Solidaria de Trabajadores
Chilavert

Unión Solidaria de Trabajadores

Comercio y Justicia
Chilavert

Unión Solidaria de Trabajadores

Comercio y Justicia

Clínica Junín
Four main contributions, or findings

1. The lived experience of macro-economic crisis on shop floors.
2. ERTs’ “radical social innovations.”
3. The emergence of more socially-just workplaces.
4. ERTs’ “recuperative moments.”
First contribution: The role of crisis in creating ERTs and transforming workers

ERTs grow out of macro-economic and social crises radiating into workplaces.

Through lived experience of crisis on shop-floors, workers transform and radicalize: from managed employees to self-managed workers.
The transformation of workers “in struggle”

“[L]ooking back on our struggle three years on...I can see where the change in me started.... [I]t begins during your struggles. First, you fight for not being left out on the street with nothing. And then, suddenly, you see that you’ve formed a cooperative and you start getting involved in the struggle of other ERTs. You don’t realize it at the time but within your own self there’s a change that’s taking place.... You realize afterwards, after time has passed. You start to do things that you would never imagine yourself doing.” (Cándido Gonzalez, Chilavert)
“The possibility that we – all people – have to realize ourselves professionally, economically, and, in our capacities to labour. It emerges from within ourselves and together with the people with whom we want to share this realization, but without sacrificing personal freedom, without sacrificing personal dignity, and from our own developmental potential. It is, in other words, about the possibility of the full development of the person.”

(Javier Depasquale, Comercio y Justicia)
ERT protagonists overcoming challenges in self-management

Learning how to be cooperators

Restarting production

Financing and capitalization

Inappropriate bankruptcy laws

Struggles (via political lobbying and protests) to reform or change business, bankruptcy, expropriation, and cooperative laws
Second contribution: ERTs’ “radical social innovations”

Transform formerly capitalist workplaces.
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Restructuring the organization’s governance, production processes, culture and goals through social values.
First radical social innovation: 
*Social and solidarity economic practices*
Second radical social innovation: 
*More egalitarian and horizontal firms*
Third radical social innovation: *Bringing the community into a workplace*
Fourth radical social innovation: Reinvesting surpluses back into the community
ERTs’ community development initiatives create social wellbeing and economies of “place”
“La fábrica abierta” – “The open factory
Third contribution: More socially just workplaces

From out of crises and collective struggles, more socially just economic organizations and workplaces emerge.

*Compañerismo* (camaraderie, or solidarity)

*Esto es de todos* (this belongs to all of us)
Fourth contribution: ERTs’s “recuperative moments”

Prefigurative experiences

The recuperation of:

1. The labour process
2. The divisions of labour
3. Surpluses
4. Workers’ abilities to cooperate
5. Workers’ capacities to produce social wealth
6. Workers’ own labour-power

Recuperating “dignity at work.”
Two North American examples of ERTs

• New Era Windows Cooperative (Chicago)
  http://www.newerawindows.com/

• Careforce Home Healthcare Cooperative (Kentville, Nova Scotia)
  http://www.careforce.ca/