# Making the city of commons! Popular economies between urban conflicts and capitalist accumulation: an ethnographic perspective from Argentina Alioscia Castronovo

### Abstract

A partire da una ricerca etnografica, in questo articolo analizzo i processi di produzione dell'urbano attraverso pratiche di commoning e processi di autorganizzazione in due differenti esperienze cooperative nell'area metropolitana di Buenos Aires. Analizzando le relazioni tra accumulazione capitalistica, trasformazioni del lavoro e produzione dello spazio urbano, e sviluppando una critica della categoria di informalità, l'obiettivo è presentare le economie popolari come campo ambivalente di conflitto, soggettivazione e possibilità di trasformazione sociale. Ricostruendo i processi socio-spaziali nell'esperienza della cooperativa Juana Villca e della fabbrica recuperata "19 de Diciembre", il contributo riflette sulle ambivalenze, potenzialità e sfide delle esperienze di autogestione del lavoro in quanto infrastrutture di una emergente istituzionalità popolare dal basso.

Based on an ethnographic research, this article analyzes the urban making from below through commoning and self organization social processes in two different cooperative experiences in the metropolitan area of Buenos Aires. By analyzing the relationships between capitalistic accumulation, labour transformation and the production of urban spaces, and developing a critique of the category of informality, the aim is presenting popular economies as an ambivalent field of conflict, subjectivation and social transformation possibilities. Delineating the socio-spatial processes in the experiences of Juana Villca cooperative and recuperated enterprise "19 de Diciembre", the contribution reflects on ambivalences, potentialities and challenges of self managed labour experiences as infrastructure of an emergent popular institutionality from below.

Parole Chiave: popular economies, selfmanagment, Argentina Keywords: economie popolari, autogestione, Argentina

### Introduction

In the last decades urban popular economies emerged in the metropolitan spaces in Latin America as a complex assemblage of productive and reproductive activities, subjectivities, practices, spaces, infrastructure and social relationships (Gago, Mezzadra, 2015) that permits the reproduction of life of popular classes and make visible both their vitality and their heterogeneous connection with the production and circulation of wealth. From

our perspective<sup>1</sup>, in order to understand the emergence of these frameworks in Argentina it's important to take in account both the progressive deconstruction of labour wage as the principle way of inclusion of popular classes in the economic system and the reorganization of the global division of labour. Moreover. situate popular economies between informality and social reproduction (Gago, Cielo, Gachet, 2018) permit us analyze the deep connection between informal economic activities, social struggles and territorialization of popular movements in a context of dispossession, financialization and precarization of labour and life conditions. The debate on popular economies is recently developing throughout both the academies and the popular organization and social struggles in South America, involving different actors, subjectivities and spaces. This debates present deep and intense political, epistemological and conceptual disputes and arguments in the scientific literature on transnational level and within the popular movements and social struggles (Gago, 2014; Mezzadra, 2015; Tassi, Arbona, 2015; Chena, 2017; Fernández Álvarez, 2017, 2018; Giraldo, 2017: Roia, 2017).

The category of popular economy emerged in Argentina in connection with the expansion of social struggles and the emerging of a specific and innovative social unionism experience that has become one of the most important political and social actors during the last years, the Confederation of popular economy workers - CTEP<sup>2</sup>. From this perspective, popular

<sup>1</sup> My research has been developed while participating to a very important working group: the GT CLACSO 2016-2019 'Economías populares: mapeo teórico y práctico'. Coordinated by Veronica Gago IDAES-UNSAM Alexandre Roig IDAES-UNSAM and Cesar Girando, Universidad Nacional de Colombia, this transnational working group is a space of research, collective mapping, elaboration, discussion and debate on popular economies in several countries and different context of Latin America. In Buenos Aires as working group we organise a doctoral seminar at IDAES UNSAM, which has been fundamental for my research and for this article. I thank Verónica Gago, Ana Julia Bustos and Martha Lucia Bernal for the very productive discussions and reflections.

<sup>2</sup> The CTEP - Confederation of Popular Economy Workers' - is the most important organization of the sector and exist since 2011. Founded by different organizations such as *Movimiento Evita*, *MTE* (Excluded Workers Movement) *La Dignidad*, *Patria Grande* and many others, this particular trade union organise different sector of informal workers like cartoneros, as in Argentina are defined the collectors of garbage, street sellers, recuperated factories, textile workers and various others self managed activities, experimenting mutualism and new form of social unionism, having a fundamental role in the

economy appears as a claim category (Fernández Álvarez, 2016b) that permits a kind of unification process of a very heterogeneous mixture of "informal" workers claiming for labour rights, social salary, mutualism and services (Fernández Álvarez, 2018), At the same time, popular economy emerged as an analytic category that opens spaces for a critique of three different conceptualizations connected to the wage less people (Denning, 2011). First, this category contrast with the conceptualization of the popular classes as marginal masses (Nun, 2010) or as excluded, in order to focus attention on what relations of production and class fragmentation look like in contemporary capitalism (Carbonella, Kashmir, 2008) analyzing the interconnections of waged and unwaged labourers in front of the increase of precariousness and new forms of accumulation. Second, this approach permits to pay attention to the heterogeneous relationship between these economies and the production and circulation of wealth. investigating their connections with consumptions circuits and new forms of exploitation, tensioning the vision of these frameworks as marginality, poverty or informality (Hart, 1973) and making visible their productivity, forms of organization and accumulation, antagonism, agency and strategic capacity. Third, popular economy as an analytic approach tensions the category of social and solidarity economy (Coraggio, 2012), which describes these economies as simply finalized to the reproduction, remits to a normative definition of individual agency based on solidarity and reciprocity (Chena, 2017; Gago, Cielo, Gachet, 2018) and separate this experiences from the dynamics of capitalistic accumulation, competition in the market and financial exploitation<sup>3</sup>.

Based on this perspective, my ethnographic fieldwork developed between June of 2016 and May 2018 in two different self managed cooperative experiences in the metropolitan area of Buenos Aires, an historical recovered factory, the '19 de Diciembre', occupied and self managed since 2002 that host a self managed school since 2006, and a textile workshop cooperative 'Juana Villca' formed by Bolivian migrant workers at the end of 2015. I will analyze these different experiences as part of complex processes of popular organization and production of urban space

popular neighbourhoods and negotiating benefits and social plans with the State.

<sup>3</sup> More on this critique, see Chena (2017); Roig (2017), Giraldo (2017).

that recombine and redefine labour, political militancy and social unionism in the metropolitan territories. My hypothesis is that self managed labour experiences and popular economies open spaces for commoning processes that contribute to redefine urban spaces from below, constantly facing and suffering consequence of dispossession and exploitation, building up infrastructures for popular institutionalism and urbanization. This article is based on a collaborative anthropological research (Lassiter, 2013; Carenzo and Fernandez Alvarez, 2012) I developed for my PhD thesis focused on socio-spatial dynamic of self managed labour experiences in Buenos Aires. This methodological perspective opens up a possibility of a theoretical common production with the subjectivities involved in the ethnographic field thanks to an anthropological approach to these frameworks as «living processes composed by bodies, affects, feelings, emotions and daily life activities» (Fernandez Alvarez, 2016a: 16). Particularly, my research was based in the participation to various spaces of self education and collaborative production of knowledge. In the recovered factory I participated to the project Colabor4 and in the self managed textile cooperative to the OTS - Observatory of submerged work<sup>5</sup> and the self education course into the cooperative. Colabor is a collective project that involves researchers and workers aimed to produce collectively self education video tools for cooperatives. During one year, researchers and workers organized thematic workshops, meetings interviews and debates in order to co-produce knowledge, videos and texts between all the participants. The collaboration between researchers, students

and teachers of the self managed school and workers of the

<sup>4</sup> Colabor is a collaborative project finalized to produce self educational tools co-produced by cooperative workers and researchers. More info: http://colabor.com.ar/ I thanks particularly Gisela Bustos and Enrique Iriarte, member of the cooperative '19 de Diciembre', Sebastián Carenzo (Universidad Nacional de Quilmes), María Inés Fernández Álvarez (UBA) Fabián Pierucci (Grupo Alavio) y Elisa Gigliarelli (Sapienza - Facultad Abierta UBA).

<sup>5</sup> OTS – Observatorio del Trabajo Sumergido (Observatory of Submerged work) is a militant research space that support the processes of organization of the Juana Villca cooperative and is composed by researchers, activists and workers of the textile workshops. The self education cooperative courses are collaborative spaces aimed to internal formation and empowerment of the workers in the cooperative. I thank particularly Verónica Gago, Nicolás Fernández Bravo, Juan Vázquez, Delia Colque for sharing reflections, discussions and political passion.

cooperative permitted define together priorities, issues and objectives and develop common knowledge and reflections, challenging difficulties and differences linked to rhythm and intensity of different urgencies and necessities.

In the first part of this article I will analyze the connection between the crisis, capitalistic accumulation and popular economies in South America during the last decades, by reflecting on the centrality of the Marxian concept of primitive accumulation in the academic and political debate. From this perspective, I will focus on different approaches that permit us to productively investigate the relationship between labour conflict, urban struggles and popular economies. After that, in the third paragraph, I will present the approach to self organization process in the urban spaces from the perspective of popular economies in order to develop a critique to the notion of informality. I will then focus on the ethnographic study reconstructing the processes of self organization in the recuperated factory '19 de Diciembre' and in the self managed cooperative 'Juana Villca', the challenges, conflicts and the socio-spatial dynamics of two self-managed cooperatives in Buenos Aires in order to contribute to the conceptualization of these frameworks as part of a popular urbanization process (Simone, 2015). This article aims to open a reflection on the challenges that self-managed labour experiences are actually facing while contributing to experiment alternative urban configurations from below: build up through self organization social infrastructures, democratize labour and society, claim for better conditions of labour and life, defend, maintain and increase commoning processes to dispute spaces and wealth in the neoliberal crisis.

## Crisis and capitalistic accumulation

After the beginning of last global crisis that involves not only economic but also cultural, political and ecological dimension at a planetary level, as the very pregnant definition of 'civilization crisis' shows (Escobar, 2017; Danowski, De Castro, 2017; Rivera Cusicanqui, 2018), the debate on the Marxian concept of primitive accumulation assumed a renovated centrality. Various scholars proposed rethink the temporality of this process that Marx situated in a specific historical time as a structural characteristic of capitalistic accumulation in different times

and spaces (Federici, 2010; Fraser, 2014; Mezzadra, 2016). This Marxian concept is particularly useful to analyze the reorganization of space and labour in the urban areas and permit us to find out in the contemporary crisis a new wave of 'primitive' accumulation, enclosures of the commons (De Angelis, 2011: Stavrides, 2014; Hardt, Negri, 2010) and reconfiguration of labour exploitation (Mezzadra, Neilson, 2014). The Marxian notion of primitive accumulation is also proposed by Harvey (2013) in order to underline the centrality of dispossession in capitalistic accumulation in the urban space. Before analyzing concrete and specific labour and urban conflicts that open new spaces for commoning practices as part of the city making process, I will focus on some aspects of the discourse on primitive accumulation that allow us to understand and analyze these critical times from the perspective of popular economies. According to different approaches that developed a critique of the contemporary process of accumulation, different scholars underlines the centrality of dispossession (Harvey, 2013), the extension of the limits of capitalistic valorisation (Fraser, 2014) and the intensification of exploitation (Mezzadra, Neilson, 2014: Gago, Mezzadra, 2015). All this different approaches are very productive in order to investigate popular economies, focusing on what Gago calls the 'intimate relationship with the crisis' (Gago, 2014) and the reconfiguration of the urban spaces and conflicts as complex networks based on self organization. From this perspective, the concept of 'accumulation by dispossession' (Harvey, 2013) is interconnected with the news form of exploitation of social cooperation (Gago, Mezzadra, 2015) that finance is exploiting through bancarisation of social rights and financialization of popular life (Gago, 2016; Roig, 2017). Productive and reproductive activities of popular economies are deeply connected with crisis not only because of its origins, but because their persistence and expansion shows like the crisis has become an unstable regime of accumulation and redefinition of the limits between inclusion and exclusion involving labour, citizenship, consumption and financial relationships.

The reconfiguration of contemporary capitalism and the actual debate about the boundaries between crisis, accumulation and new forms of social struggle can be productively analyzed taking in account the way Nancy Fraser (2014) reconceptualises capitalistic accumulation. In her essay 'Behind Marxist hidden

abode', Fraser redefine the proletarian condition identifying dispossession as the basic condition that permit being exploited, just like Denning (2010) propose «decentre wage labour in our conception of life under capitalism [...]. The employment contract is not the founding moment. For capitalism begins not with the offer of work, but with the imperative to earn a living» (Denning, 2010: 80). From his point of view, dispossession and expropriation create the conditions of the possibility of the proletarian condition, whose labour condition is depending of processes of attraction or expulsion of workers in different capitalistic configurations of accumulation and exploitation dynamics. From this perspective, popular economies grow up as consequence of the process of expulsion, like Sassen propose to conceptualize the global rise of inequality that characterize contemporary crisis (Sassen, 2015).

Fraser proposes this concept as a tool for analyzing capitalism in a broader way: rethinking the notion of primitive accumulation, Fraser underlines the tendency to the continuous expansion of the border of capitalist valorisation, through appropriation of spaces and commodification of new territories, relationships and resources. As Fraser argues that social reproduction, ecology and political power constitute structurally necessary conditions for capitalism accumulation, this expanded conception of capitalism represents a very productive perspective to analyze popular economies<sup>6</sup>. From this interesting and productive perspective, the critique of capitalism and the same class struggle should include these various battlefields that are the scenarios of new resistances and conflicts in the contemporary societies and urban spaces. Fraser argues that an anti capitalist critique need to go beyond the very economy in order to understand the complexity of this regime of domination and production, showing the background conditions of possibility of production in contemporary capitalism that this different fields represent. The life and labour conditions of self organized workers in the popular economies, the motley and multilayered urban spaces they produce and live in, the intermittent temporality and heterogeneous incomes of the wage less lives, using a

<sup>6</sup> Fraser's analysis of contemporary capitalism in order to investigate popular economies was proposed by Veronica Gago during the phd seminar *Economías populares: mapeo teórico y práctico* organized during 2017 by the homonymous CLACSO working group at IDAES UNSAM.

pregnant definition that Michael Denning proposed (2011) are becoming under neoliberal capitalism spaces of colonization and valorisation, and for instance spaces of resistance, of struggle and conflict. This perspective permits a more complex analysis of the urban condition focusing on the intersection between self managed and precarious labour, urban dispossessions and financial exploitation (Gago, 2015; Roig, 2017). Popular economies appear as a battlefield where capitalistic colonization of new territories and activities, through financial exploitation, valorisation and expropriation of wealth and space confront with self organized practices, dynamics and logics of working, resisting, producing and reproducing life inside, against and beyond capital and State.

### Popular economies and urban spaces

The plebeian insurrections and popular riots (Gutierrez Aguilar, 2008) that put in crisis legitimacy of neoliberalism in different countries of Latin America at the beginning of the new century and deeply redefined the regional scenario constitutes a key process to understand the reconfiguration of urban conflict in the last decades. According to Gago (2016) to trace a political genealogy of the contemporary popular economies is fundamental to find out the political origin of these frameworks, connecting them with the struggles that around 2001 faced neoliberal crisis. As she argues, the role of living labour and social antagonism in the urban spaces appears as a urgent political question in Argentina exactly during the emergency of the piquetero7 movement in the 90's and around 2001 (Gago, 2016). The increase of precarization, unemployment and fragmentation of the working class, the growing of so called informal economic activities and the unemployed workers struggles contributed to the spatial reorganization of class conflict in the urban space. As the value is produced in the whole metropolitan space after the end of the centrality of the industry and the salary mediation, cities started to become the spaces of class struggle where the antagonism between living labour and capitalism unfolds.

The centrality of collective and community practices in order to resist to the crisis and reorganize urban common life,

<sup>7</sup> The definition of *piqueteros* for the unemployed movement is linked to their struggles practices based on *piquetes*, blockades, that were done not in the factory any more but in the public spaces, in the streets and often highways.

infrastructure and welfare, deeply modified the space and time of the city through different dynamics of self organization that made possible reproduction of life in the popular territories and created the possibilities of new forms of production and accumulation of wealth. The recombination of these experiences and the increase of informal economy because of the processes of expulsion that characterize contemporary financial capitalism (Sassen, 2015), made possible a particular assemblage of what Gago called 'motley *baroque economies*' (Gago, 2014) that established during the decade of progressive governments and economic growth of Argentina ambivalent relationships with the market, the State and finance (Gago, 2014; Mezzadra, 2015; Roig, 2017).

As the metropolitan areas have become the central spaces for production of wealth investigate the boundaries between labour, social and urban transformations represent a very important point to understand contemporary capitalism. Productive transformations deeply modified urban spaces since the last decades within contemporary planetary urbanization (Brenner, 2014), through the reorganization of global division of labour and deindustrialization, outsourcing and relocation of factories and workshops, development of logistic infrastructure of global economy and expansion of extractivism. Different and coexistent process produces new socio-spatial dynamics, hierarchies, differentiation, social fragmentation and concrete forms of expropriation that articulate and spatially materialize in the neoliberal process of urbanization. According to Mezzadra and Neilson (2014), the extractive operation of capital involves not only spaces and territories, but also forms of social cooperation. This perspective makes possible to rethink the relationships between dispossession and exploitation - both labour and financial one - as articulations of a more general extractive dimension of capital that characterize contemporary mode of production. From this point of view, urban extractivism would appears as a more general process that involves gentrification, urban renewal, segregation and displacement but also new dynamics of financial exploitation and extraction of value from social cooperation, including self organization experiences. As Simone affirms, in the Global South the popular urbanization process confronts with specific problems and limitations (Simone, 2015) connected to the conditions of urban infrastructure. economies and spaces that since the 80's suffered neoliberal austerity policies and deindustrialization. This processes deeply redefined both the time and spaces of urban life (Obarrio, 2002) and the configurations of the geography of labour, welfare and services: in an effort to investigate boundaries between popular economies and urban transformation from below, in this article I reflect on self managed activities and cooperatives as an opportunity and, as Simone argues, as a kind of platforms for new urban economy (Simone, 2015).

### Beyond informality: self organization and multiplication of labour

In this paragraph, I will outline questions, experiences and practices that emerge in the urban space in Argentina in order to situate the ethnographic perspective I will develop on selfmanaged experiences and popular economies as infrastructure of emerging institutions and urbanization process from below. The phenomenon of recuperated factories, occupied after their failure and self managed by the workers with the support of community (Ruggeri, 2014; Azzellini 2015; Vieta, 2012) has grown up during the last decade until arriving to 368 experiences and almost 15 thousand workers (Facultad Abierta, 2017). The continuity of these experiences and the reproduction in different context. sectors and area shows their strength and capacity to reinvent tools and struggles in different context. Particularly during 2001 crisis, in the neighbourhood a huge proliferation of assemblies and various forms of popular organization transformed spaces and activities, while other organizational processes, just like recovered factories, continued during the progressive governments and also increased their importance. Is this the case of the cooperatives of *cartoneros*<sup>8</sup>, that produces innovation and an important ecological support for the whole society, the

<sup>8</sup> Cartoneros are called in Argentina the street sweeper that recollect and recycle plastic, glass and cardboard, in general recycling the garbage creating circular economies and organizing in cooperatives in order to claim for better condition and negotiate benefits with the State.

<sup>9</sup> For more info: Carenzo S. (2017). «Invisibilized creativity: Sociogenesis of an "Innovation" Process Developed by Cartoneros for Post-Consumption Waste Recycling». International Journal of Engineering, Social Justice, and Peace, 5: 30-49; Carenzo and Schmukler (2018). «Hacia una ontología política del diseño cartonero: reflexiones etnográficas a partir de la experiencia de la cooperativa Reciclando Sueños (La Matanza, Argentina) ». Buenos Aires, Immaterial. Diseño, arte y sociedad, 3 (5).

heterogeneous migrant small enterprises in the villas<sup>10</sup>, street sellers, care work, community kitchens and other self managed jobs literally invented by unemployed people, constitute some of the most important experiences of this complex assemblage of economic activities of popular classes. All this different networks shows subalterns capacity to create their own job and define collective strategies and at the same time makes visible the huge variety of activities that wage less people does to guarantee their reproduction. Popular economies appear from this perspective as a constellation of practices and conflicts whose meaningful instability shows a particular and specific articulation of ambivalent subjectivities, struggles, strategies and projects socially embodied and spatially organized. The popular, affirms Stuart Hall, is a battlefield constantly transformed by struggles and disputes, defined by contrasting dynamics of resistance and incorporation (Hall, 2006). This constitutive ambivalence. that Gago define 'neoliberalism from below', appears in these frameworks as a coexistence of neoliberal values, practices of resistance, community logics and individual calculation in behalf of the «appropriation of neoliberal conditions from below as an answer to dispossession» (Gago, 2014: 18).

The persistence of self organization in the heterogeneous and creative ways through which popular classes organize their life the urban space, accumulate wealth and confront with dispossession, labour and urban transformations is a central characteristic of grassroots movement in Argentina. On one side they face State inability to provide infrastructure and public services as healthcare and education and on the other negotiate with the State the recognition of informal and self-managed activities as labour (Gago, 2016). The very connection between popular economies and social movements enable an innovative critique of the category of informality (Hart, 1972) as it has appeared during the seventies in the third world and is still used in social sciences. Originally this category was used to define wage less masses (Denning, 20015) that outside of Europe were historically the majority of population, demonstrating that under capitalism wage labour has been hegemonic both geographically and historically for a brief temporality (Quijano, 2014). According to this critique, race, gender and class hierarchies

<sup>10</sup> In Argentina it means slum.

are constitutive of social fragmentation and exploitation, based on coexistence of different labour regime and heterogeneous economic activities exceeding wage relationships. 'Informal' activities have often been see as a problem, a lack or an absence, the negative side of an incomplete modernization rather than a residual marginality, which would have been eliminated by the advance of development and progress that would have arrived at the post-colonial periphery from the centre. But current neoliberal capitalism demonstrates the contrary: as Sassen (2015) underlines, informality and precarity are growing globally and constitute a structural dimension of capitalism especially in urban and metropolitan areas. In this context, the current multiplication and fragmentation of proletariat, urban spaces and forms of labour is the result, according to Carbonella and Kashmir, of combined «political and structural violence that today constitute key avenues of dispossession and the creation of precariousness» (Carbonella, Kashmir, 2008; 52). From an anthropological perspective, they propose to reconceptualise anthropological subjects within historical and spatial processes of capital accumulation starting from this « dispossession and the production of difference, the accumulation of labor, the politics of dispossession, the violence-laden disorganization of working classes, the myth of disposable people» (Carbonella, Kashmir, 2008: 43). Analyzing the global processes of reconfiguration of labour, space and mobility in the production of subjectivities, Mezzadra and Neilson (2014) proposed the concept of multiplication of labour for understanding the new regimes of exploitation and investigate the contemporary scenario of class struggles. The authors identify three tendencies of contemporary labour transformations: first, the intensification, as a tendency to colonize entire life-time, second, the diversification, as a process of expansion of what is included as labour and third the heterogenisation, concerning social and legal regimes of contracts, flexibilization and outsourcing (Mezzadra and Neilson, 2014). In this context, labour struggles are immediately investing other territories, subjectivities and spaces, as we will see in the different experiences, the self managed factory and the popular economy cooperative: from this perspective, as Gago and Sztulwark (2016) affirms, popular economies represent a paradigmatic space to investigate «what the popular is and how it functions today, the relationships between the popular and the

common, the variations of the common, the possibilities of its composition, and its chances for becoming concrete affirmations in the current dispute over modes of life and their increasing exploitation» (Gago, Sztulwark, 2016: 611).

### Working without bosses: the recuperated factory '19 de Diciembre'

The recuperated factory '19 de Diciembre', situated in San Martin district, an historical industrial area of Buenos Aires metropolitan area, is a metalworker occupied factory whose process of recuperation started in 2002, when the conflict raised up and a group of workers decided start an occupation that opened the possibility of self-managing production under worker's control. This experience of workers organization had an immediate connection with territorial organization of social movements and struggles, with neighbourhood networks and other recovered factories that makes it a strategic place for analyzing reinvention of labour as a common. A main aspect of its development as experience includes the active role in the transformation of the urban socio-spatial dynamics, economic productivity and use of the spaces of the factory that make possible a reorganization from below of territorial conflicts, services and mutual aid which overflows its own borders. During the crisis of 2001 in San Martin district, northwest periphery of Gran Buenos Aires, the workers of the Isaco factory were hardly fighting for defending their job and after various lavoffs in December 2002 the owner of the factory closed and declared failure. A small group of workers decided to struggle standing for days in a tent in front of the factory, denouncing the situation and receiving solidarity from social movements and neighbourhoods. It was happening in hundreds and hundreds of factories and enterprisers all over the country.

«People from other occupied factories and activist of different groups came to support us» told me Enrique, who worked more than twenty years in the factory, during my first visit to the factory, «we had no chance in that hard times it was impossible to find another job. We had no alternative, so we decided to occupy the factory» (interview to Enrique, June 2016).

The recuperated factory '19 de Diciembre' produces spare parts for cars and sell it to other enterprisers. During the ethnographic fieldwork, conversation, interview and informal meeting emerges that occupy and self manage a factory is a social, political and economic process that deeply tension, transform and challenge identities, subjectivities, relationships between private and public spaces, forms of living, using the space and modify the insertion of the factory and his workers in the territory. As Ruggeri affirms, recuperating factories is not the product of an offensive capacity of the working class, but an answer to neoliberal offensive (Ruggeri, 2014), a defensive and desperate answer to expulsions and deindustrialization imposed by neoliberal politics. But at the same time, this conflict permits the collective production of new subjectivity that reorganizes workers and practice knowledge, spaces and roles, way of working and cooperates.

«We recuperated labour while during the crisis the unemployment was growing every day, we invented a different way of working, we avoided to keep without job and suffering with our families. But we also transformed this space and decided to offer services to our neighbourhoods, as a form or return for the solidarity we received. Today, after more than fourteen years, we work for several other companies, and although we work in freedom and self organize our job inside the factory, we still depend on the market and we fight everyday with providers, with companies and with the State. Nobody likes that us as workers self organize our work, but we resist because we do all this with responsibility, taking care of the space, of our comrades and of our job» (Interview to Enrique, December 2016).

Caro is a worker that joined to the cooperative after the recuperation and during a meeting in the factory affirms:

«We work in freedom, but at the same time now that we manage the whole factory we go home and continue thinking to the factory, how to solve problems, how to find out new strategies for facing the crisis, but we also discuss it all together like we never did before, we support other recuperated factories or other struggles in companies and factories in the district» (Interview to Caro, October 2016).

The materiality of the solidarity as a tension towards the other comrades and the neighbourhood is visible analyzing te private space of the factory that was property of the boss and has been transformed radically after the recuperation process. The offices that were part of the company management has not only become a collective property of all the workers, but also a commons space, in terms of collective space that open new possibilities. For the reasons that Enrique explained, inside

the factory there is a popular library, a self-managed popular school, officially recognised by the State thanks to long term mobilisations, whose students receive scholarships and the teachers are paid by the State. The spaces where various private offices were situated until 2002, finalized to the accumulation of private wealth through exploitation of other workers, has become through the collective action and struggles spaces for studying, where young and no more young neighbourhood can study, meet, educate and organize. The self managed school is part of the Coordinadora de bachilleratos populares, a metropolitan educational network based on self education and Freire's pedagogic methodology that established popular schools in several recuperated factories, trade union places and community centre in the huge capital city and metropolitan area of Buenos Aires. So in the '19 de Diciembre', workers teach in a school, students learn from the struggles and the experience of self management, teachers learn from the workers. Almost all different subjects get involved in territorial networks and redefine the socio-spatial dynamics connecting in a different way education and labour, mutualism and solidarity as a complex assemblage self organization producing constantly territories. The coexisting tendency toward self-management and pragmatic relationship with the State and the market, the intersection of social struggles and daily practices, labour and activism are continuously tensioning the borders between private and public spaces, productive and reproductive activities, renovating and changing both labour and militancy habits (Fernandez Alvarez, 2016) and tensioning the «operative principle of common that animates social cooperation» (Gago, Mezzadra, 2016: 109). During a collective mapping laboratory<sup>11</sup> in the factory, with a large group of students, workers and researchers we were creating an alternative cartography of the area, focusing on social relationships that redefine the borders of the 'Espacio Popular 19 de Diciembre', the self definition of the whole assemblage of project I have recently presented. In this map, we started to represent all the conflicts linked to recuperated factories and the connection among self managed spaces, community centres and solidarity network. The way solidarity

<sup>11</sup> This workshop was part of the COLABOR Project, a collaborative research project based on developing tool for self education in recuperated factories. More info on www.colabor.com.ar.

and cooperation value and resources are constantly created as material and symbolic practices, concrete possibilities of organizing spaces of commoning and opportunity for building world providing new infrastructure for the urban (Simone, 2015) were collectively represented on the map opening spaces for a collective discussion and allowing strategic imagination.

During the mapping workshop, a particular productive atmosphere made possible that everyone could contribute from his own experience and perspectives, not only to reconstruct collectively how the spaces of factory and the territory changed through socio-spatial relationships, but also creating new collective projections. Almost all the participants joined some of the different spaces that we are mapping trying to rethink collectively the multiplicity of connection and the modification of the borders between the inside and the outside of the factory. Less than twenty blocks from the factory, there is a health centre, situated at a border of a slum in the same neighbourhood that was born as a self managed organization and was lately recognized by the State. This health centre maintain a particular organization based on horizontal assemblies that involves all the workers and some of the neighbourhoods, providing medical assistance to the people of the neighbourhood but also organizing spaces for collective organization linked to health care, claiming for public economic support and networking with various organizations. Various of the students that does their internship at the health centre teaches science at the self managed school in the recuperated factory, while the health centre provides medical assistance for the self managed workers of the '19 de Diciembre' and other cooperatives.

A great collective space that involves several political and territorial organizations, cooperatives and self managed experiences is the *Mesa Reconquista*<sup>12</sup> which compose an emergent territorial organizations that discuss, propose and materially organize different projects, offer concrete services, provide tools and support to groups and collectives, establishing relationships with the University of San Martin and the Municipality of the district. The assembly of recuperated factories in the district, the so-called Mesa de ERT de San

<sup>12</sup> Mesa Reconquista is a territorial network of popular economies, self managed factories, popular schools, cultural centre and community territorial organization of San Martin district.

Martin, is another very important space for mutualism and support between recuperated factories (there are actually 12 ERT in the district) that also improved some specific municipal laws that recognize the social and economic role of recuperated factories for the district. The variety and variable intensity of this relationships, reciprocity frameworks, mutualism and economic exchange between heterogeneous subjectivities and spaces represent kind of infrastructures for a new configuration of the urban from below

### Weaving the common: the Juana Villca cooperative

The metropolitan area of Buenos Aires has an important role in the reconfiguration of geographies of labour linked to global value chains in the textile sector, connected with migration trajectories particularly linked, during the last decades, with Bolivia. Almost 70% of the textile sector production is outsourced to the informal workshops<sup>13</sup> emblematic places of a *urbanization* of injustice (Gago, 2014). The double spatial and discursive segregation makes invisible migrant work and exploitation, relationships with big transnational companies and the textile regime of production. In the district of Tres de Febrero, in the neighbourhood of Ciudadela close to the huge Rivadavia street, at the western border between capital and metropolitan area, a very new experimentation of cooperative textile common labour was founded two years ago by Bolivian migrant workers challenging spatial injustice (Soja, 2016), labour geography regime and subaltern conditions in the market's hierarchies. Tracing a genealogy of the process of organization, struggle and strategic imagination that made possible this self-managed cooperative composed by almost sixty workers, linked to the experience of Simbiosis Cultural collective and affiliated with CTEP, I will analyze the dynamics of self organization in this experience and the challenge they're facing.

From the southern part of federal capital city until the last *villas*<sup>14</sup> of the metropolitan area, informal and community based networks connect La Paz to Buenos Aires, the informal workshop to the popular markets and the sparkling windows of the shopping centres. If we look at Buenos Aires from this

<sup>13</sup> INTI (2011).

<sup>14</sup> In Argentinean language it means slum.

spatial and social perspective, this huge metropolis appears as a complex heterogeneity and rhythms of transnational networks and plebeian vitality, labour exploitation and different form of wealth accumulation and financial accumulation. Gago affirms that «mapping popular economies is a way of mapping neoliberalism as a battlefield: they are a space-time of situated economies that are key for thinking about how capital, through the diversification of financial forms, attempts to incorporate new territories» (Gago, 2015:25). The ambivalent relationships with the market, the State and the finance, and the efforts towards democratization and construction of autonomous forms of organization make popular economies a strategic territory both from the perspective of class struggle and the capital.

The huge concentration of motley workers, popular abilities, powerful creativity and potentiality of city making that reinvents and mixes a multiplicity of cultural, social and economic practices historically and spatially situated, articulated and over layered. The self-managed textile centre Juana Villca is situated some hundreds of meters after the eastern frontier of capital city and was founded at the end of 2015 in order to organize collectively informal workers, get out of the ghetto of informality and resist to criminalization and exploitation of migrant work. After the fire in two different informal workshops in which eight people died between 2006, in Luis Viale street, and in 2015 in Páez street in the neighbourhoods of Caballito and Flores<sup>15</sup>, the ghost of informal work invaded the city showing the "normal" condition of outsourced labour. The public discourse on informality produced criminalization and invisibilization of the migrant workers as well as of the enterprisers and State responsibility for some unsecure and exploited workers' condition. After the second fire, the collective Simbiosis Cultural and other Bolivian organization decided to organize public assemblies in order to discuss collectively about their condition of work and elaborate new strategies to transform their condition, connecting with self managed and community spaces like Casona de Flores and the CTEP. From these assemblies started a complex and difficult process which involved various workshops and workers that finally founded the 'Juana Villca' cooperative. As in the informal workshops the coincidence of house and workplace represent

<sup>15</sup> More info at juicioluisviale.wordpress.com

an economic advantage for the 'enterpriser' and make possible accumulation of money that circulate and expand popular economies, the separation of the space for living from the workplace was the first attainment of the cooperative.

«When a migrant arrives here, he first need a place to sleep, food and job: this system provides it easily and in the same place» 16 told me Juan, activist of Simbiosis Cultural and worker of the cooperative, explaining me why this model proliferates among the migrant, taking advantage from community networks in order to obtain insertion in the neoliberal informal textile market. Among these 'economic strategies' we can find reactualization of ancestral or traditional logics of organizing common life through cultural, symbolic and ritual dynamics and historical working class' struggle strategies that produce heterogeneous motley frameworks (Rivera Cusicangui, 2018) mixed with calculation and 'self-entrepreneurship' (Gago 2015). This kind of labour organization allows the 'enterpriser' to provide food and bed to the migrant workers, often familiar or friends, and be able to earn some money and get profits. These forms of accumulation, mixing exploitation and kinship and community relationships, is linked to community finance, economic and political informal networks and subaltern strategies in order to reproduce their life under this regime of production and domination. These fragmented communities that constitute themselves facing multiple dispossession processes on transnational level are, according to Gago, examples of the ambivalence of popular economies as spaces of dispute and conflicts that involves habits, embodied affects and cultural dynamics.

The reasons for joining the cooperative, as various workers reveal, are very heterogeneous: during the first interview, Luis told me that he joined the Juana Villca when «police confiscate my machines because I didn't have the official permission to work in my house, so I lost everything and I joined the cooperative in order to be more protected», while Marcos consider that he «joined this cooperative although I didn't trust in political organization but I want to work on my own and do not depend of others, so I calculate that this experience can help me».

Juan affirms that «our aim is to combine work and politics, self education and social struggle, collective mobilization and

<sup>16</sup> Interview with Juan Vazguez, August 2016.

community work» and for these reasons, as part of the collective *Simbiosis Cultural*, he put all his efforts in this process. The coexistence of individual calculation and necessity of a collective organization is a continuous tension that crosses the experience. The heterogeneity of experiences and complexity of collective and individual strategies that I heard listening to the voices of the workers, during informal conversations or interviews, needs to be understood from a native point of view, in order to understand subaltern's agency both as resistance and as a project (Ortner, 2014). First, recognizing them ability to define strategies confronting dispossession, exclusion and exploitation, secondly, understanding that participation to the cooperative and the experience of self management are complex challenges, full of complexity and difficulties, that involves and mobilize multiple biographies, subjectivities and identities.

Cristina is a bolivian woman, she arrived some months before starting to work in the cooperative to Argentina, and affirms that «I want to contribute to a different labour organization in order to avoid to other migrants like me this terrible condition that we all lived ». The memories of previous experiences are often collectively discuss and shared, in order to emphasize the common experience and create space for confidence. «It's hard and difficult, but we are putting all our energies and resources because we want to demonstrate that is possible to work collectively, in better conditions and escaping that terrible places we have all experienced and lived in» affirms Delia during an assembly in the cooperative. «We also build networks with other workers in cooperatives of factories, and we organize especially among migrant workers in order to make visible the oppression we are suffering because of racism and austerity policies» continues Delia<sup>17</sup>. Challenge the processes of invisibilization of migrant labour force and the forms of their subordination to a structural regime of spatial injustice (Bret et al., 2016; Soja, 2016) is a central aspect of this self organized cooperative. Make visible these frameworks permit to rethink the urban as a place of collective struggle against the combination of dispossession and exploitation, creating different kind of solidarity networks inside and outside the cooperative. As an example, the cooperative established relationships with the self managed farmers of the

<sup>17</sup> Interview to Luis, Marcos, Juan, Cristina y Delia, October - December 2016.

UTT<sup>18</sup>, the union of workers of the land, in order to have good quality of food in the cooperative and at the same time support them in solidarity.

The workers are creating their own spaces for make collective decision possible and open up a collective discussion that involves all the associated, to define the way of organizing labour process, the social and political relationships, the participation to popular economy workers' demonstration, the ways to resist to the economic crisis that during the last two years are deeply tensioning the economic sustainability of the collective process. After the first year of collective work in the same space, Luis shares with me some of the achievement he affirms have been obtained. «We decided discuss how many hours we have to work and how to organize the space where we work together, this is really something new and we are learning to decide collectively in assemblies. But we still depend on the suppliers and are not able to negotiate the low price of our work, neither the temporality of the work delivery»<sup>19</sup>. The collective organization permits both to question the internal hierarchies and the external regime of exploitation, as I have argued deeply in another article (Castronovo, 2018): this double tension, inside and outside the cooperative, characterize this experimentation of unionism that aims to organize social cooperation and workers without bosses that fight against the devaluation of work, the lack of social rights and financial exploitation (Roig, 2017). This complex composition of practices, problems and challenges that Juana Villca cooperative is facing exhibit how political transformation and production of commons coexist, as Gago argues, with mass capacity of self organization in the neoliberal global market (Gago, 2014).

# Open conclusions: between urban commoning and social conflict

The experiences I have briefly analyzed overflow the borders between labour and social conflict, between productive and reproductive activities, providing services and welfare reorganizing spaces and territorial relationships from below: for these reasons I propose to define these experiences as infrastructures of an emergent popular institutionalism based

<sup>18</sup> *Union de Trabajadores de la Tierra*: it is the most important organization of popular economies peasant workers of the suburban area of Buenos Aires. 19 Interview to Luis, December 2016.

on self organization. These frameworks of popular institutions enable to produce the urban as a common, and both renovate and redefine social conflicts in times of austerity and neoliberal hegemony. On the other hand, the perspective on urban popular economies I have delineated according to various scholars and critical studies permit us to analyze urban transformation and social conflict from the point of view of the popular sector's strategies and struggles, in order to situate the urban question in within the processes of class struggle facing extraction of value and wealth accumulation.

As we have seen in both cases, self organized and popular economies are not separated from the market and the more general processes of accumulation of capital (Gago and Mezzadra, 2015); they constitute rather a battlefield between new logics of accumulation and extraction of value and heterogeneous practices of class struggle that reinvent popular and workers institutions. Following these authors, the ambivalence that characterize these frameworks represent both the main reason of its expansion related to a subaltern insertion in the global trade and exploitation circuit and the condition of possibility of the reconfiguration of class struggle and social antagonism.

The neoliberal policies are producing in the last years structural waves of expulsions (Sassen, 2014) caused by dispossession and financialization of economies that are producing poverty and social fragmentation. In this context, self organization in the urban space is globally growing and showing his ambivalence that are deeply connected with the centrality of consumption in the processes of inclusion and production of subjectivities, the criminalization of popular life and informality and the increase of criminal economies. These phenomena create a space of overflowing of different kind of urban violence escalating in the last years because of austerity policies and flexibilization of labour and connecting with the growing popular debt. So the increasing power of finance in the territories connected with popular economies and within this framework with new illegal accumulation of capital in the metropolitan areas creates an ongoing process of «segmentation of hierarchized spaces due to differential access to security [...] that promotes a "civil war" in defence of property» (Gago, Sztulwark, 2016). From this perspective, the urgency of analyzing critically ambivalences and potentialities of self-organized urban economies is urgent

in order to permit an exhaustive comprehension of the current social processes in urban territories and the definition of possible strategies to confront precariousness and dispossession.

Focusing on the experiences I have analyzed in this article, I underline that the spaces they enable and their effort to answer collectively to processes of individualization, isolation and precarization constitutes specific ways to confront the neoliberal production of subjectivity based on the ideology of the self entrepreneur. These experiences demonstrate that collective processes of self-organization have a specific productivity in terms of politic, economic, social and cultural ways to dispute the forms of capitalistic accumulation making the city as a common, in terms of what Gutiérrez Aguilar define a «collective appropriation of disposable material wealth and of the possibility to decide on it and define the way to use and manage it collectively» (Gutiérrez Aguilar, 2015: 32). As part of multiple ways of organizing life in the territories, in the neighbourhoods and slums, in community centres and in suburban zones confronting neoliberal way to self organization, recuperated factories and collective labour forms of self organization of popular economies make visible popular and social infrastructures as new possible configurations of urban life, reinventing the urban as a common through interstitial and potential alternatives based on reciprocity, community and cooperative practices (Gibson Graham, 2013; Gutiérrez Aguilar, 2015) to resist and challenge capitalist relationships and spaces.

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